

Nine Recognitions



A Squirrelthief

Illustration by FortunaFox



In the Library

2021



In the Library



Kansas public library
ArchiTexty

Sometimes when I feel like I've spent too much time on the internet, maybe reading through the whole archive of a bizarre webcomic,¹ or digging up journal articles far outside my field,² or searching word etymologies after midnight,³ I start to worry that I've lost myself to the thrall of the screen and the merely interesting,⁴ but then I have to look back and recognize what would have happened if, traveling to the early 1990s, I were to track down my childhood self sitting in a corner in the library and hand myself a magic, glowing book that I could read forever.

The library is where I grew up, and mentally I still spend a lot of my time there. First it was a small city library in a small city in Kansas, then a smaller but stranger school library in a much larger Indian city. There have been too many others to think about. The only thing better than the feeling of a familiar library is the gentle mystery of an unfamiliar one.

I will always defend the existence and funding of public libraries. But I also recognize that for me the library is not so much an institution, or a building with its weird mid-century concrete rampart, as a feeling of envelopment.

¹ Diana Sasse, *Antique White House: The Kennedy Tales* (2002–2011), <http://web.archive.org/web/20110623042820/http://www.graphicsmash.com/comics/kt.php>.

² W. Czechowski, T. Rutkowski, W. Stephan, and K. Vepsäläinen, Living Beyond the Limits of Survival: Wood Ants Trapped in a Gigantic Pitfall," *Journal of Hymenoptera Research* 51 (2016): 227–39, <https://doi.org/10.3897/jhr.51.9096>; or T.S. Lee, "Physiological Gustatory Sweating in a Warm Climate," *Journal of Physiology* 124 (1954): 528–42, <https://doi.org/10.1113/jphysiol.1954.sp005126>.

³ Online Etymology Dictionary, "Gun (n.)," <https://www.etymonline.com/word/gun>.

⁴ Sianne Ngai, "Merely Interesting," in *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 170. Ngai however defends the interesting and finds that "the deepest content of the aesthetic judgment of the interesting is precisely that of the justification of aesthetic judgments in general".



The capsule dream

That feeling has been in circulation in online artistic communities like anime, 'aesthetic' pixel art and the furry fandom. It's captured in artworks of the perfect fantasy room, an introvert domain that usually has some bookshelves and always a window seat for the single occupant to curl up in in front of a view of something cool. I know this fantasy of a capsule life, especially from around the age of fourteen, when I not only spent huge amounts of time sitting in windows or under furniture with my knees up, reading, but also had a memorable daydream about living in a sealed room with a powerful computer, a several-gigabyte hard drive, a reliable internet connection, and a slot in the wall that would deliver books and bottled soft drinks.

At that age, I wanted every computer game to have a play-through time of 30 hours minimum,⁵ and every book to be part of at least a trilogy.⁶ After I finished the game, I wanted to find glitches or codes to break out of the levels, to believe there was more world out there even though I knew the mountains outside were just part of a pixelated skybox, and beyond that the void. After I finished the last novel in the series I would grow melancholy, and if fan fiction had existed yet for the things I was reading, I might well have gone there next.

It seemed like I just wanted to throw my hours at everything. And I still recognize that tendency to attention submission. Sometimes I need to read or watch or get through something just *because* it's extravagantly long. It imposes some monumental form on what is, really, just more wandering through the library. I especially read long books on long plane trips, because they feel like the same thing: submitting to being taken somewhere.

At the same time, I know that the form of what I'm making my way through, how distant the end is and what I'll see there, isn't really that big of a deal. I don't ask that anything be a masterpiece. I am just as happy with procedurally generated worlds, collaborations with randomness, or even my own (co-)creations made just to enchant myself.



"Dreamspace"

Kacey Miyagami / <https://furaaffinity.net/view/22645410>

⁵ Black Isle Studios, *Planescape: Torment* (PC, 1999).

⁶ For example, reading Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973), *Rama II* (1989), *The Garden of Rama* (1991) and *Rama Revealed* (1993) as well as, almost simultaneously, the *Ramayana*.



The view beneath the ice

So to what do I really submit my attention when I submit it to the library? It's not knowledge, quite, or truth; in the library even false things are true.⁷

I think of it as the view beneath the ice. When I was young, I once was visiting my grandparents' farm, as we would often do before we left the United States, and everything was thawing after a freeze. I followed my cousins on one of our walks to "the bridge", an unremarkable little culvert that was simply something we could walk to down the straight country road. The stream of cornfield runoff under the bridge was crusted with ice but trickling along beneath. My cousins got bored and started home, but I paused for a minute to lower my head down more and more, towards a hole in the crust of ice, until I had my one open eye beneath it. I took in the view of an inch-high ice cavern of spectacular crags, silver water, bouncing winter light, and blades of grass waiting dormant below. It's all still there in my memory, because I decided at that moment I had seen something important; and I had seen something important because I now *understood* something important. I shared a secret.



The bridge disenchanted
Google Street View 2019

If the library has a native value, it is this: understanding. Understanding is what a library is for. I could find something in a library that would help me understand more of the natural forces that shaped the view beneath the ice, but I could also find something that would help me understand its beauty. Either would build upon that initial glimpse of understanding I found when playing around with my perception and perspective in the world.

The internet is another matter, more frictionless than ice and more dangerous in its frictionlessness. It can turn the library into a dopamine casino driven forward by the occasional sublime jackpot.⁸ The underlying value of understanding hasn't changed, though. When I get lost on the internet, I'm still trying to understand. That value is what *makes* the online sublime sublime.

I insist that the library is not for consumption, exactly, or production, but for play. Attention submission especially (which the internet demands always, under the abusive guise of a free attention economy) *should* belong in the realm of play. Play is a basis for the chase of understanding, in a way that work is not, because while work is in the shadow of risk, play doesn't care that much. This attitude ties the fascination with the clearly pointless – a bad webcomic, a procedurally generated fake landscape, a momentary and dissolving icescape – with the serious pursuit of understanding.

⁷ Robert Anton Wilson, epigram to "The Appendices", in *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1984).

⁸ *Moleman 2 – Demoscene – The Art of the Algorithms* (2012), <https://molemanfilm.com/moleman-2-download>.



A collection of recognitions

In the spring of 2020 under the first COVID-19 lockdown, in a classic pandemic-era move, I decided to buckle down and figure out some things. My apartment in Copenhagen had become something rather like the capsule rooms of internet artists. I did have a very nice window seat, and the scene outside was suitably fantastical. I had a better computer and faster internet connection than my fourteen-year-old self could have daydreamed, and I had time and attention for my magic book. I found myself unmistakably in the library, and the more I recognized that feeling, the more I recognized that in some major ways I might still be fourteen.



Window seat and three pairs of scissors, Copenhagen, 2020

Because understanding is the native value of the library, I wanted to understand – but what did I want to understand? I could have followed a million rabbits down a million holes. But looking back at a few recent years of trying to grasp some particular thing or things, I was troubled by the lack of a clear line of sight on what I was after. I had too much experience with glimpsing something, then putting it back on the library shelf and losing track of it again before recognizing it again months later, then months after that.

So I decided that if there was one thing I needed to work on understanding – or play with understanding, as the case might have been – it was this phenomenon of *recognition*. What was I seeing when I would realize something, and in doing so realize that I had often realized it before?

During some midnight etymology I was pleased to learn that although to recognize is, predictably, to experience *re-cognition*, the oldest meaning from the early fifteenth century was in fact to “resume possession of land”.⁹ In that respect, what I sought to do was find these scattered fields and put them under permanent cultivation.

I began with a kind of auto-ethnographic sorting exercise. I got a pad of paper and started writing out short phrases, no more than a line each, that represented objects or moments of recognition. Many of these were references that would only make sense to myself, like “the view beneath the ice” or “penguin on a unicycle” or “even false things are true” – all recurrent enough thoughts that I know exactly what they mean. Under early-lockdown conditions I wrote these for days, sitting in bed or in the window, or under a tree in the cemetery on a day when it was mild and deserted out.

⁹ Online Etymology Dictionary, “Recognize (v.),” <https://www.etymonline.com/word/recognize>.



Once I had written down as many as I cared to, feeling emptied of significant glimpses of meaning throughout my life, I got some scissors. My wife owns 30 pairs of scissors and they usually end up being important to my projects. This pair I used to cut the pad of paper into thin strips with individual phrases – each being, remember, just a single line. I shuffled these up, stopped for a glass of water, and then began a long process of sortation. I cleared the floor of the library (not the metaphorical library this time, but our name for the room in our apartment where we have our desks, a sewing table full of scissors, the window seat and lots of books). I started laying out phrases and clustering them into like recognitions, grouping any that seemed in some way like they might lead towards the same thing. The clusters became more, and then fewer and fewer, as I convinced myself that the actual number of distinct recognitions was quite small and graspable.

I got down to nine. These could not be consolidated further; mutually repellent qualities seemed to keep them at a slight distance from one another. The first one that I cut down to a single name was: “in the library”.

Nine recognitions. This is what I called them, because their ever-recurrence was what really convinced me that they were entities. Not to say that I knew what kind of entities. Were they questions? Ideals? Aesthetics conjured or called for in different circumstances? Were some good and others to be disciplined, or were they all to be accepted as my constituent organs?

The immediate need was to give them some fixity. Along with names I tried pinning the nine recognitions to other sorts of mnemonics, increasingly silly ones, like colors (“in the library” was Manila paper); gestures (raised knees); and the contents of particular shelves in my apartment (a loupe, a plastic shark and a coin collection). I mapped them into a diamond shaped chart as a sort of mock-structuralist play at holism. In various ways I kept them at the front of my mind as I went through the plague year, trying, and mostly succeeding, to see them everywhere.

It was a bit more than a year before I reached what I should have always known would be the final stage of the project: deciding to write something about each of the recognitions. The writing-up is the more stressful part, the part that takes me out of the library.¹⁰ I aimed not for great cleverness or originality in what I wrote, just clarity and honesty. This is, of course, the first essay. Others will come.

Plenty happened in that year, and still I managed to do a whole lot of reading, too. One important guide in this was the anthropologist David Graeber, who suddenly died in the fall of 2020. In following some of his followers after his death, I came across the complete archive of a course he taught on value theory and all the readings.¹¹ From this I picked up the idea that each of my recognitions was tied to a value – as with *understanding* in the library’s case.

¹⁰ To help, I have allowed myself breaks to return to the stacks for citations, links and images. I’ve now spent more time on those than writing and should probably reign them in for the other essays.

¹¹ Seminar on Value Theory (Anth 252/473), London School of Economics, Lent Term, 2015.



Following Graeber, people in societies tend to represent forms of value to themselves with tokens, and also tend to mix these up with the value itself.¹² So I considered tokens, too. In the library, the tokens of understanding are readings: what and how much I have read (or watched, played, otherwise absorbed...) is the simplest way of keeping track. The social field in which this value exists and these tokens circulate is, as simply put, the field of culture. And because values are illuminated by their negative forms, I note that the negative of understanding is not caring.¹³

Probably the thing I find most convincing about Graeber's anthropology is that he tends to trace everything – even central forms of value – back to fundamentally irresolvable dilemmas of human life.¹⁴ It makes such an immense kind of sense that people in a society, and across societies, are muddling through the universe trying to answer the same questions, and that these are the questions without answers by nature. The questions *with* answers *get* answered, each society in its own way. It's the irresolvables that persist and create the conditions for value to have value; they create a scarcity of significance instead of a superabundance; they gild the precious.

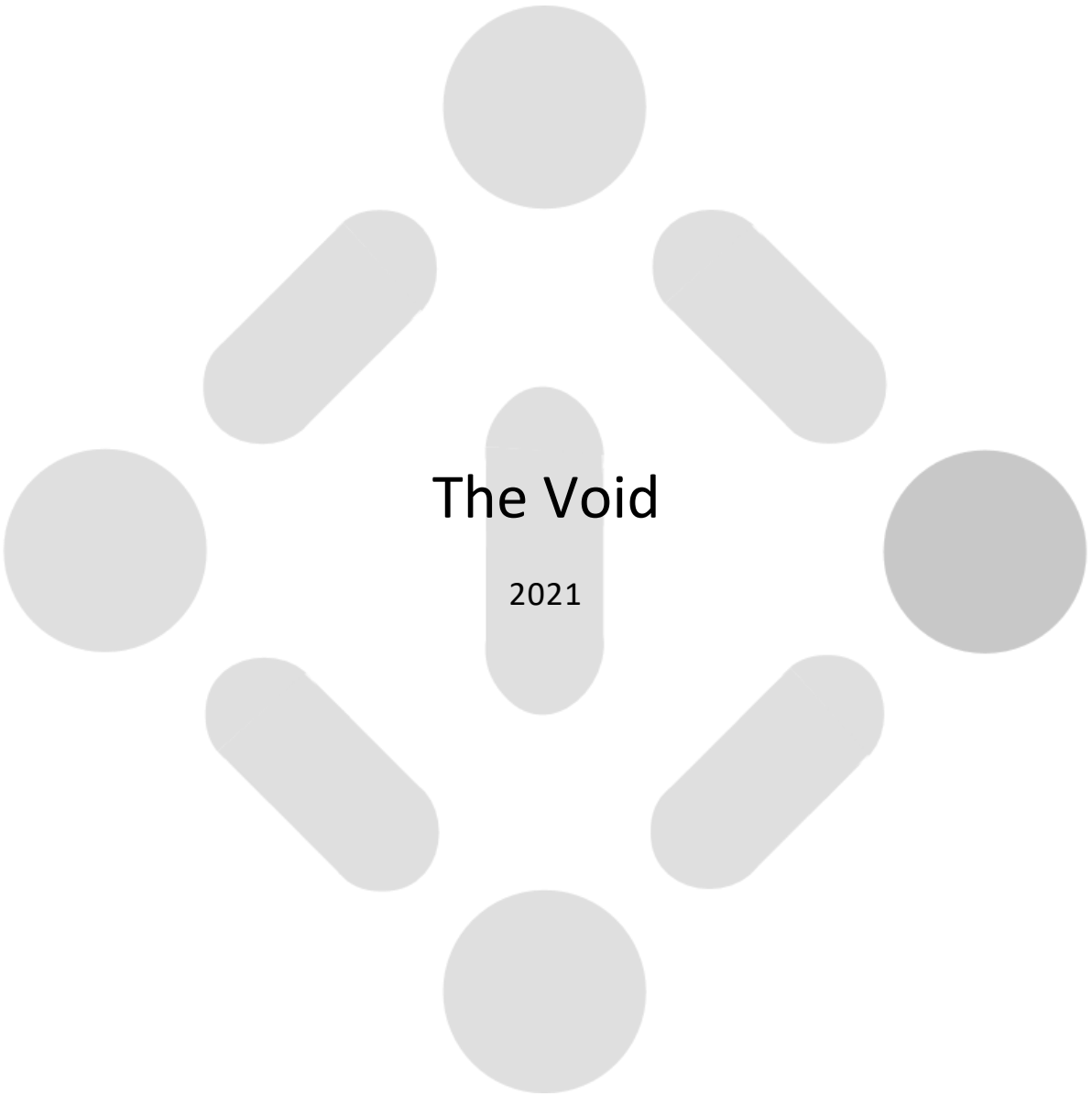
I have a feeling that there is also an irresolvable dilemma beneath each of my recognitions and its native form of value. Some of these are a little hard to articulate, although I think I have found them. I start from the library, on the other hand, because the unanswerable question here is a very basic one. It is simply the irresolvability of living in a world that was not made to be understood.

¹² David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 75–78; building on the terms of Terence Turner, *Production, Value and Exploitation in Marx and in Non-Capitalist Systems of Social Production* (unpublished manuscript, 1984).

¹³ I opt to call this negative rather than antithesis because I'm trying not to suggest anything too dialectic. This language of negative values really comes out of the failed 1950s values project of Clyde Kluckhohn and his team, which Graeber found interesting. See Ethel M. Albert, "The Classification of Values: A Method and Illustration," *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 2 (1956): 221–48.

¹⁴ For example, as far as economic value goes, what cannot be resolved is the axiomatic insatiability of our needs and desires, against which we can only know and measure scarcity. Or: we have economics at all because "we have been turned out of Paradise". Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: Macmillan, 1932), 15.

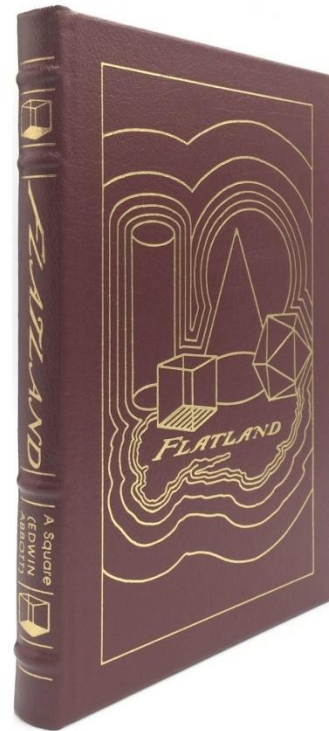




The Void

2021

The Void



Flatland by A Square (Edwin Abbott),
unknown edition

Pick up a novel. It could be any novel, but I'll go with an old public-domain classic, *Flatland*.¹⁵ For a fantasy that is short (it might really be a novella) and not exactly thick on characterization, I remember finding the protagonist, one Square, to be somehow relatable and endearingly Victorian as he grappled with strange visitations. It has been many years since I first read it, so I don't really recall, but if I got attached to the Square as a character then I probably felt a little sad when I reached the end. Sad, yet peacefully so.

This peaceful sadness is an old habit. It doesn't have much to do with how a novel or series of novels ends (quite upsettingly for the Square, who finishes up languishing in prison for his heresies), and it isn't even really present on the last page. The feeling attaches to the part of the book that comes after the last page: the back cover.

The covers of a book are the hardest limits to a certain continuum of experience that is the characters' world. They are unbreakable walls around everything inside, and even a multidimensional voyager like our Square is powerless to look beyond them. What is inside the covers of *Flatland* may not seem real to us, but what is outside the covers is far less real to the Square. Outside the covers is the void.¹⁶

¹⁵ Edwin Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (London: Seeley & Co., 1884). Available without covers at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/201>.

¹⁶ For present purposes I'm following in the tracks of the secularized fandom theory of 'canon', which objects to boundless intertextuality and gives certain functions of reality to imaginary continua. An intertextual Square is not part of my metaphor here, but I would still like to read your *Flatland* fan fiction.



Knowing death in life

To the question of whether a continuum like mine or yours is like a novel, I can only answer that life and fiction are alike in precisely the ways they are alike. To the question of whether that matters: it matters in the ways it matters. The novel form – as opposed to others like the myth or the daily comic strip – has mortality to it, and it is that mortality that makes the Square, on his journey from dust to dustjacket, relatable. My book and yours have covers too.

I'm not sure whether I got it as a factory default or came by it at an early age, but I'm convinced that this was my starting understanding of nonexistence. Because of it, any interest I have in afterlifeways and cycles of reincarnation is strictly anthropological, and I've always had a bit of trouble in general with people who think death is a mystery. I have a limited attention span for death because I come from the assumption that we all know what being dead is like. It's the same as not being born yet.



Duck Amuck, 1953



Pi, 1998

In fact, how you got from nonexistence to conscious and individuated life as a complex adult mind is a years-long and probably far more interesting story. Compared with that, the trip from life to death is only the tiny gap between a synapse that fires and the next one that never does.

So we have all been dead for an eternity already, and will be for another one. Despite how boring that is, I know it is a fixation for most people much of the time, and I see an irresolvable in that: the desire to have a relation with nonexistence even during a brief and glorious sojourn in existence.

The fixation is not just on the death of one's own or other individual minds. It easily telescopes to forms of death beyond death: the end of everyone who knew us and every mark left by our passing;¹⁷ the extinction of species, including ours;¹⁸ the end of the world, the universe, or New York City.¹⁹ Nor is it really or only about death. There have been countless attempts to uncover the nothingness in life, too, from Siddhartha to Sartre. All such thinkers and thoughts share a need to look upon the void from here in existence.

¹⁷ As in the Swahili notion, popularized for Anglophones by John Mbiti, that a person remains in a middle category of "living-dead" until the last person who remembers them has died. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 212–13.

¹⁸ Dougal Dixon, *After Man: A Zoology of the Future* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

¹⁹ *Unclear Holocaust* (2011), <https://vimeo.com/42724320>.



White light

The void doesn't bother me much, but I do encounter it in one of my recognitions, and often at the end of a book. In the way that irresolvables generate forms of value, the call of nothingness establishes the native value of the void: peace. The irresolvable creates a space for valorizing something in life that more rightly belongs to death.



Illustration from *Flatland*

There is, indeed, value in that. In years past, I often suspected myself of harboring a black heart of chaos. When it came right down to it, I just wanted to see things end, to see plans fall apart and empire submit to entropy. More recently I feel like my black heart of chaos has been swallowed up by the white light of the void – some of it, anyway. The void is something different: it does not negate or destroy; it only exposes the nothingness that was there all along.

When I describe it as a white light, this is as I've always seen it. It is not out in the beyond, like in the film and animation trope, but embedded at my core – roughly at my solar plexus. I like to visualize it there, a hole in my being that leads to nothingness.

I think of it at difficult times, when worried, exhausted, overwhelmed, feeling or anticipating a failure, just generally burdened. Then, I take the burden in my hands and push it into my chest, into the void, out of existence. What it means to me to do this isn't to destroy the thing, but to dissolve it in the recognition that it was never really solid matter, never mattered. I am always a little doubtful of this ritual when I do it, but it always works.

Consigning burdens to the void is quite a direct way of deriving the value of peace from a relation with nonexistence. It is something adjacent to giving up. It doesn't mean that I stop taking a problem seriously – but it sort of does.

The ritual brings me close to the question of why giving up is such a threat anyway, and to what or whom, and what social code or impulse tells me to oppose the void. Is it so necessary to always make a show of demonstrating that I stand on the side of life? Who do I think might take me for a traitor?

Life is a pattern of being in time, and I think the trouble here is with time. A span of time has limited duration, and that will always be a scandal for the living – but it does not mean that a span of time has limited depth. This might just be another of my factory defaults: the understanding that something of finite length can be infinitely deep.



Duration and depth

There are two movements to this understanding. For the first, I'll return to the idea of a book. If I hold *Flatland* in my hands, every moment of the Square's life is there. I can't see a given page while reading another page, and neither can the Square, but no words leave the paper after I have moved on. Even years after I've read it, the words are still there, and it would take an outrageous egocentrism to imagine that they have faded as my memories degrade. I don't see a reason, either, to imagine that past (or even future) moments in my life are gone just because of certain quirks of my perception and limitations in my language that make it difficult to construct a statement acknowledging their reality – something like “everything that has happened remains happened”.

Despite these quirks it is possible to proceed as though all moments have being, in the same way that I can live as though Hangzhou or Hyderabad exists even though I cannot see them from here. I know it's possible because this *is* how I think, and I'm confident that I am not alone in it.²⁰ The first Olmec head is being carved, I'm pulling up sassafras roots, my father is playing high school football, I'm on an island in the West Lake. Treating all moments as present is really quite easy to do, and it allows the depth of each of those moments to come into focus. This is the second movement.

On what axis does a moment have depth? Maybe not one, but many. A moment in a novel can be read and interpreted differently by many people; can be layered with meaning; subjected to all the prisms of language. Our generous existence has even more dimensions. A moment of time happens everywhere in space at once, and is different everywhere, and for all who perceive or seize it. As it breaks, it is also limitless in potential; an infinity of things can happen. And even after just one of those things happens, what it *means* retains its prism of possibilities. It happens across scales; across social fields, frames and symbolic systems; it potentially affects everything around it. The depth of a moment can't be appreciated as it happens, because I am a slow thinker and narrow of senses. Nor after, because my memory is a rudiment. I can feel the depth is there, though; it can matter to me.

The beautiful thing about all of this is that things that ever were ever are, but the *way* in which that matters is circumscribed – and that circumscription runs directly across the path of power. Recognizing the infinite depth of a moment, or an event in history, is not at odds with the void. But sustaining power through history is at odds with the void. Entropy is still the ultimate answer to power. All empires crumble.

In other words, I like to think that bad things are only bad while they last, while good things are good outside of time. I don't propose this as some sort of moral orientation in existence, just as part of what bad and good mean. If the bad is totalitarian, aiming for duration, then the good orients perpendicularly towards the infinity of depth.²¹

²⁰ I don't have any examples at hand of different temporal concepts in different cultures, but within our own I think this underlies some of the fantasy of time travel, as well as similar ideas about perfect surveillance of the past. One far-out example is in the film *Dragonfly Eyes* (蜻蜓之眼) (2017) where it is suggested that the Earth's magnetic field is a giant natural CCTV camera, encoding a record of everything that happens within it.

²¹ Using some terms of Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979).



Empty gestures

When things are bad, when I need to make a potentially paralyzing decision, or when I just need to give up on something, then the void is with me. I acknowledge the irresolvable need to keep a space for it in my time of existence. I keep it close, in my chest; I push things into it and out of meaning.

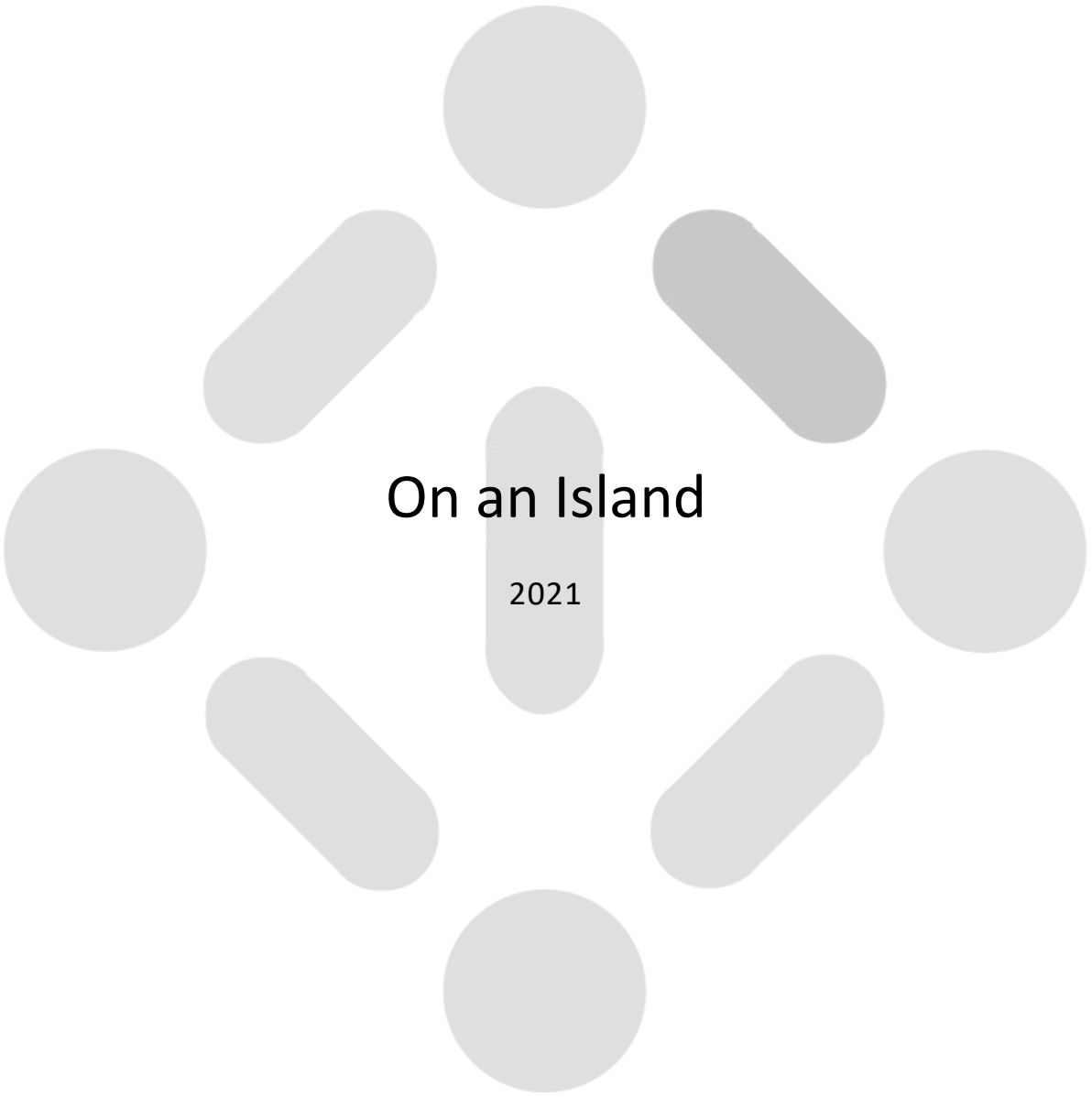
It is a comforting gesture, but only a gesture. It is a metonym for a vast and non-anthropocentric cosmos, for the billions of living minds of which I am only one, for scales at which neither I nor my burdens exist in any significant way, from the worlds of ants²² to the ends of worlds.²³ All of this exists and doesn't exist in the void.

Rather than investing death with mystery, I try to let the void enrich everything that is – and fill everything with peace. This has allowed me to do most of the hardest and most frightening things I have done in life. At various times people have told me that they think I am not easily disturbed, that I take everything in stride and that I act without much hesitation. To the extent that their impressions are true, then the void is my ultimate source of bravery.

²² Bert Hölldobler and E. O. Wilson, *The Ants* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1990).

²³ Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men* (London: Methuen, 1930).





On an Island

2021

On an Island

I'm on an island. I'm on an island, looking out over the whole island – it's a small island in the middle of the sea. There are puffins. I'm getting a haircut in a Chelsea gallery while the movements of the scissors and clippers are processed into electronic music. I'm up all night drinking Cokes above a soon-to-be-destroyed secret lake. I'm stepping naked into a hole in the ice on the Øresund. I'm eating a morsel of yak just to be a good guest, although it's very moldy. I'm eating at the dining table of the Nizams. I'm eating hákarl. I'm eating 臭豆腐. Performance artists are serving me salmon while someone takes a shower. I'm scaling a microwave mast in the dark, surrounded by flying foxes. I'm hitchhiking to the Well of Birds, and the driver keeps asking to see my penis. I'm in a wildfire shelter in Tasmania. I'm shuffling towards the center of a mud volcano until I reach the last safe ground. I'm running through the giant balancing boulders of the Deccan and suddenly, one explodes. I'm under Krasnoyarsk Bridge trying to see some Ninja Turtle graffiti on the abutment. I've climbed a mountain above Lake Kivu to get a signal and make a phone call.

I'm visiting a friend who lives there. I've wandered to the pleasure gardens, the ones up in the hills where people from town go on the weekend. I'm not taking photos, because I don't need photos, because I'm there.²⁴ I'm in a place that is also the past. I'm at the ends of the world and the end of the world. I'm following marks of flour through the forest to go



²⁴ Most photos here were taken on other people's cameras, proving I've never really been a solitary traveler.



places I never would otherwise. I'm on a train that is rolling through a landscape, and the train feels like a little rolling island of its own. I'm waking to the sound of a tent zipper. I'm on a very big planet, but a small island. I'm following a lost river in London. I'm following a lost railroad in Brooklyn. I'm somewhere nobody needs to be, up on the rooftop HVAC of the world. It's midnight on the winter solstice. I'm rolling a die to decide which way to turn at the intersection. I'm going to the highest point. I'm taking off my hat and opening my eyes wide to see it all. I'm feeling extremely fortunate to be where I am at this moment.

When I was a fifth-grader in Kansas, entranced with ziggurats and squirrelthieves and kapok trees, and our teacher asked us what we wanted to be, I said a world traveler. She told me that it sounded nice but it wasn't a job; it was something you had to be rich to go around and do. Whether I was rich then, and whether I'm rich now, are very relative points, but one way or another I did become a world traveler. I have been on many islands, and I never pass up a chance to set foot on one, whether it be in the North Atlantic, the Zambezi or a cattle pond. It's not that there is anything special about islands as such; they are just irresistibly discontinuous, geographically actualized. Whether at the end of a long flight or just a swim, arriving on an island always feels a little impossible.

The experience economy

It's the big marketing-world cliché about my generation that we value experiences over material things. I hate when advertisers are right about anything, but they got me with that one. It has absolutely been a prime form of value in my life, and accounted for most of my outgoing disposable income and carbon dioxide. And maybe I am even grateful that marketing gurus latched onto the idea so I can't. It makes it necessary to think about experience in the least pleasant way, as a consumerist ideology.

Consumerism here is the idea that obtaining and consuming things, without necessary regard to need or even use, is the path to individual fulfilment and self-expression. "Things" isn't restricted to the material, and it was astute of marketers (starting in the travel business, probably) to realize that the ideology was bending towards experiences.



But marketers must be opposed at every turn, and this leads me to ask what an anti-consumerist critique of experience would look like.

Interrogating experience as a form of value, then – the reigning value wherever I feel the recognition of being on an island – I find that the main tokens of this value are visions. When I stand on a ridge and open my eyes wide, I'm minting this coin. The negative value of experience, I guess, is fear; a world traveler is supposed to be fearless.

And there is also something irresolvable behind the value of experiences and the significance of being on an island. I once heard it from a man I met on a train in Morocco. He was making the point that one should always talk to people when traveling and take their invitations to tea, because, he said, gesturing at the Atlas peaks outside the window, "You can't make friends with mountains." That assertion stuck with me, even after I came to know that this man rode this train from Rabat to Fez every day, posing as a businessman, to meet tourists on the journey and funnel them into his employer's carpet shop by evening. So making friends with people isn't always straightforward, either.

Besides, he underestimated the appeal of making friends with mountains. I think the irresolvable at hand here is precisely the desire to have a relation with a place – or even the convergence of a place and a moment. By relation I mean something squarely social, the kind of relation one has with a person who might share a joke, warmth, fascination, respect or love, which is not the kind of relation that a little chunk of spacetime, a forest glade or a rock in the ocean, can reciprocate in quite the same way.

That dilemma can lead to the sort of spirit geography where islands really are treated as people, but the terms of capital take us in a different direction. Even the social is rendered consumable by these terms, and ever more so. Somewhere along the way people have formulated theories of consumption for experiences too, and it's thus they enter the economy. It is not an inherently sensible question, though, to ask how an experience is consumed; the statement brings together a material process (based on the process of eating food) with an immaterial value. How does that work?



Yama's spreadsheet

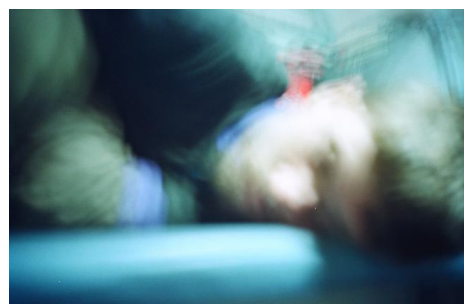
I remember a dream, or maybe just fantasy, that I had when I was a teenager in India, well after I'd been told that world travel was not a career. I died and found myself standing before a Yama-figure, who showed me a spreadsheet (it may actually have been in Excel) of everything interesting I had ever experienced. It was on this, rather than any matter of sins or virtues, that my life was to be judged. This is what I mean by a theory of consumption: the experiences had to be made to matter, made *into* matter, to overcome their innate transience with some sort of lasting weight that bore the mark of my ownership. Yama was in charge of that.

There are probably lots of these theories, with associated practices of materialization: souvenirs, photos, name-carving, social media, literal eating. Or simply the idea that our experiences make us who we are. The experience economy sits atop all sorts of theories people have about how they are extracting value from the places they experience while the economy extracts value from them.

Once when I visited the archaeological site of Ebla in Syria, home to the world's oldest library, I ate a little bit of tel dirt with the hope that some of the minerals would be incorporated into my body. I can still look back on that as not too irrational a thing to have done.

When I'm out there on a tel or on island, everything is valuable to me. Every sight is a vision, and I never go away disappointed. Every cancellation is a new opportunity to do something unexpected. Every hardship becomes the whole point of being there, becomes, in the phrase of my travel-happy relations in Romania, "adversity fun".

It is only at certain unguarded times that it all catches up with me. Usually this is as I lie down in a strange bed. I associate the feeling so much with sleeping in unfamiliar places, and it goes back so far in my life, that I still think of it as *sleepover angst*. It isn't homesickness, just the feeling of being lost –outside of meaning, in a place of no relation. I cannot explain or justify why I am there. Too far out on the edge of experience, I see that it only matters as far as it matters; that / only matter as far as I matter. It was probably on such a night I dreamt of Yama.

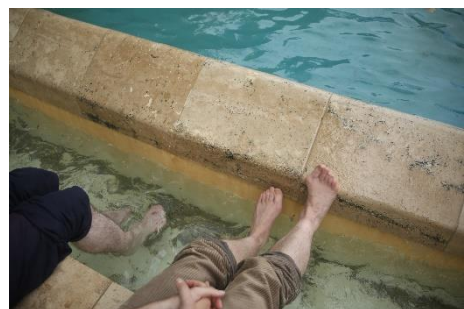


The experience commons

Yama probably doesn't keep spreadsheets, and the significance of experience is still an open question. The consumer framing is just one way of answering it, just like there are other ways of thinking about material goods and resources. For instance, one can decide that material things belong to everyone. That there is too much out there for any one person to make use of, and what should matter is not what I have, but what we all have and make and maintain together. This is the ideology that in current fashion is styled as "the commons".

What happens if, for fun, we map this idea of the commons onto the domain of experience? So: what matters is what all of humanity experiences. This is not so hard to do. Etymologically, experience and experimentation are nearly the same thing.²⁵ One can theorize a human horizon of experience a bit like we do the horizon of knowledge advanced through collective scientific experimentation. The planet – never mind the universe – is a big place for one person to experience but we're not doing such a terrible job as a sentient species.

Granted, this throws up some big problems straight away. One is the need for a theodicy: what about the large share of human experiences that are bad? Are they meaningful, and necessary? Just adversity fun? And what do we do with inequality? Following the idea far enough, a billionaire having a picnic on Mars would be a triumph for all of humanity, even if it's his exploitation of humanity that gets him there. In fact, one could argue that diversity of experience is a virtue and equality is thus a detriment. More fundamentally, it's hard to see what such an ideology implies about individual action, if anything – what does it tell me I should do with myself or others?



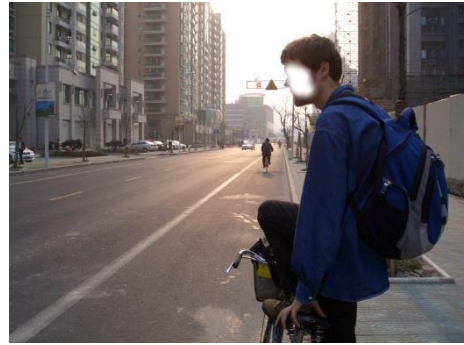
²⁵ Today, experience and experimentation only mean the same thing in the domains of sex and drugs. As an asexual with little interest in intoxication I try not to read much into this, except that these are two domains where people will always have to figure some things out with their own bodies. But I would be quite interested in how someone with a large spreadsheet of sexual experience or drug experience might write this essay. That some people will always go out of their way to experience things which others will go to any lengths to avoid, and that we have language and art to share the results with one another, is what makes being a person truly glorious.



I first wrote up this idea of the experiential commons in the summer of 2016 leading up to a terrible US election, and it became a comfort then to imagine history as nothing more than a big messy exploration of existence. It got me through a bad time. I knew, all the same, that I had left an even more basic question unsettled and thus never moved past the dream of Yama and his spreadsheet. If all human experiences matter, do I want to imagine that they are all on *one* spreadsheet as big as the sky? Or do we have to keep track of them ourselves?

It took time for me to come around to an answer and abandon Yama for good, but I did, and in doing so allayed some of the problems I posed above. In fact, this took me most of the Trump administration. In that constantly challenging desert of meaning, I decided that the mattering of experience is not absolute; it flows through the social. If I step onto an island, it matters to me. If we go there together, or if I tell you about it, share my vision, show my slides, it matters to us. This scales to a point where an experience can matter to huge collectives. But I have given up the last remnants of a comforting fantasy where experience just plain counts for something.

This decision to radically socialize experience has had two ramifications. The first has been an admission: that when I experience something by myself, and forever after keep it to myself, it really goes nowhere. It has been more difficult an admission than it might sound because I have done a *lot* of this. I've tried to make friends with many mountains, and my willingness to go to great lengths for experiences I've never shared have fed totally immoderate heights of personal consumption over my lifetime. So much of it, I now have to admit, I've simply forgotten. If I had shared more of those experiences with others, the difference would not be large but it would be real. I feel, today, that I have had enough solitary adventures for one person, and would do better to pay off what debts I can.

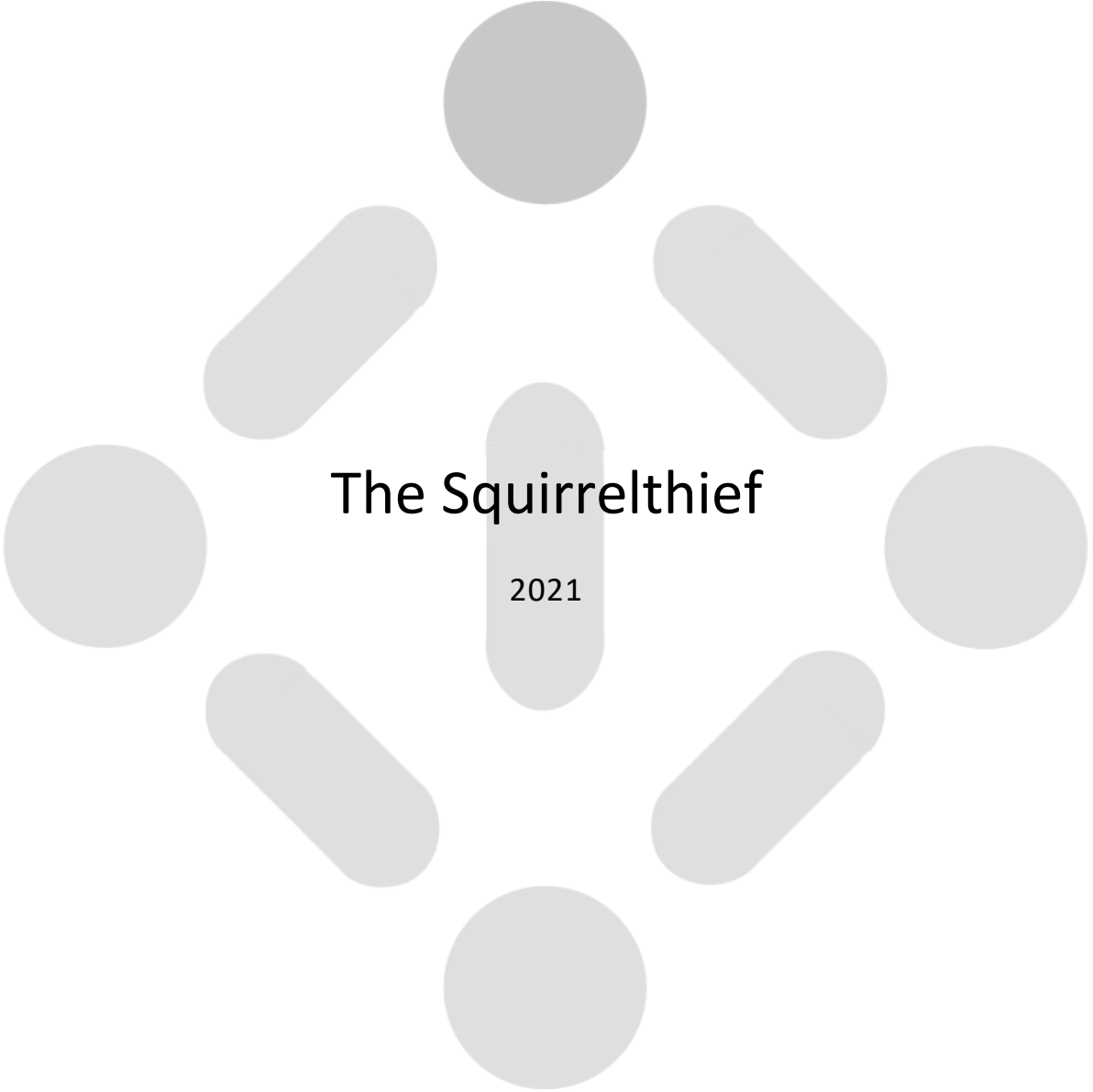


Compounding this feeling is the second ramification, which is also a recognition: that the world can experience itself perfectly well. Of course I've always known this. Most islands I have visited are inhabited, and the residents wake up there every day. My travels have sometimes (maybe always) skirted the colonial, but I've never been so delusional as to think I discovered a place. So what is lost if I never visit, say, Sulawesi? There are fifteen million people who know it intimately, and millions more who have known every day of its history. They are right now drinking tea in the streets. Experiences happen and experiences flow.

This idea I actually like very much because it dispels worries about the limitations of my singular ability to experience and the vast array of things I have missed out on experiencing in the past, am missing out on experiencing while I sit here writing this paragraph, and will miss out on in the eons to come. It is also the version of the commons that rings true:

The world and its visions are here for all of us to experience, or to befriend, or to consume, or above all to share; and that doesn't mean we each get an equal piece of it – as with any commons, equity has to be negotiated and fought for – but it means that if you climb a tree and have a moment to look out over the whole island, it's as valuable as me climbing that tree and having that vision, and perhaps both of us climbing the tree together is worth something more.

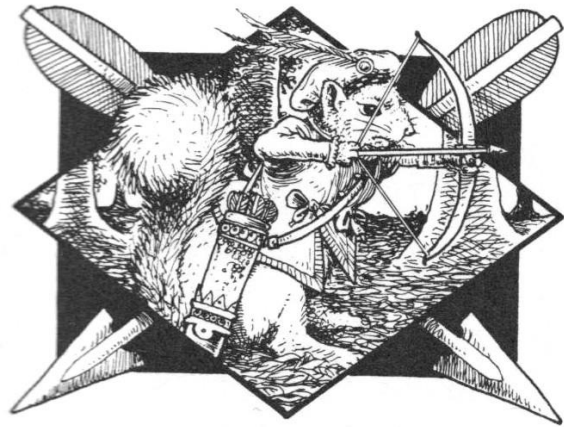




The Squirrelthief

2021

The Squirrelthief



Lady Amber, *Mossflower*

I go into this recognition expecting it to be the hardest one to write about, though not because it is anything painful. It's more that it draws nearest to who I am while also being too simple for comfort. If my inner being were wreathed in a nebula of quantum uncertainty and impossible to bring into focus, that would be a different challenge. Instead I sit in the vulnerable position of explaining something that is just too explicable, and that is myself.

In 1994, in an Outer Banks vacation house, I read Brian Jacques's animal adventure novel *Mossflower*, published six years earlier.²⁶ This kicked off years of readership of his Redwall series of utopian fantasies and what I might in a later decade have referred to as fandom. While it was only the second book in a series that kept coming out until 2011 and reached 22 volumes, *Mossflower* was *my* book. The characters were uncomplicated as they could be, and each became dear to me. My favorite was not the grim-faced warrior hero Martin but his more fun sidekick, a Jacquesian Enkidu or Hanuman of sorts, Gonff the mousethief. The irrepressible social bandit²⁷ Gonff was a real fictional crush. At the same time, among the different species of Mossflower Woods it was the squirrels that I most admired – there, and in my leafy university-town real world as well. So after a good dozen read-throughs of *Mossflower* and the other Redwall books this all melded into the hardly original idea (what I might in a later decade have called an OC) of the squirrelthief.

And that, in a paragraph, is it. Try as I might to be a cool intellectual, just behind the scenes I'm usually thinking in the most childish of terms, carrying around a combination of tropes and simple moral fantasies with no real currency in the adult sphere.²⁸ These marked me by coming into my

²⁶ Brian Jacques, *Mossflower* (New York: Philomel, 1988).

²⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1959); cf. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

²⁸ Jacques often said in interviews that Gonff was his favorite character too, and was based on his own young self – suggesting he had long since grown out of the role. ““He was a ducker and weaver, and so was I. There was nothing around, but if you came from a poor family and there was something left around, you picked it up. I came from the docks. Gonff tried to help others.”” Doreen Carvajal, “No Wizards, Matey, They’re Wise Enoof; A Gritty Liverpudlian Finds Refuge with Feisty Woodland Critters,” *The New York Times* (2 April 2001).



library bag at the exact time when I was deciding who I was going to be. Granted, that is what young adult fiction is supposed to do, and it would be no embarrassment in itself if I had gone on to refine and dress this ideal self in progressively more mature understandings after the age of nine. But no. I think the squirrelthief is still just who I am.

Why do I admit to this now? Because it is a core sample of my self through time, and the most direct window I have on the weird, contradictory token known as character. In the body of the squirrelthief my own inner character and the swashbuckling fictional character who came to serve as an ideal converge, or maybe aren't separable entities at all.

Animating a squirrelsona

I never even gave the squirrelthief a name, but without much difficulty I could describe him as a bundle of attributes. He is kind and unbothered. He is good – the highest value in the Jacquesian microcosmos. He distrusts the powerful but approaches all others with open-pawed epoché. He is asexual and lightly gendered.²⁹ He is a climber, ably and compulsively. He has a trick for every situation, whether it works or not. He doesn't so much steal as he *thieves*, a way of moving through the world at will. He knows adventure better than worry. All of which misses the point that a character is more than just its attributes. It is animate.



Rangval, *Eulalia!*

A bit beyond the tradition of performance studies invented by Erving Goffman and reinvented by Judith Butler, in the last decade Teri Silvio has outlined an anthropology of animation that seems relevant here. If performance is the construction of social selves through the introjection of qualities from exterior models and the expression of those qualities through the body, in Silvio's working definition, "animation is the construction of social others through the projection of qualities perceived as human – life, soul, power, agency, intentionality, personality, and so on – outside the self and into the sensory environment, through acts of creation, perception, and interaction."³⁰

Silvio describes twenty-first century cultures entering an age of animation as people spend less time performing their selves and more time animating, which can become a far more collaborative process without running into the same questions about selfhood and authenticity. We accept that a whole team of animators might make a character move and speak, and a host of fans might reinterpret or play it.³¹ This isn't just about film or games, though; starting, perhaps, with the arts of

²⁹ My favorite Jacques squirrel was *Mossflower's* Lady Amber, and I could likely have related to her much more directly if she had been written in the same detail as Gonff.

³⁰ Teri Silvio, *Puppets, Gods, and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 18–19. Her approach began earlier with the article "Animation: The New Performance?," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2010), 422–38.

³¹ An actual animated series was created from the Redwall books between 1999 and 2002, but reached me too late to be of much interest. At the time of writing Netflix is funding another one.



puppetry and broadly “animist” modes of ritual, animation can be many things and many things can be animated.

After all, each culture determines what counts as a human quality and what is a nonhuman thing. In some cultures animals are just things to project on; in other cultures, they are less viable for animation because they have human qualities to begin with. Our own culture is quite confused about what animals are, and that might be what makes zoological anthropomorphism so captivating. If there is something that can scamper along the thin boundary between agency and projection, or performance and animation, it’s something like a squirrel.

I have to think of the squirrelthief as both performance and animation. Often I seem to perform the squirrelthief as a role, a personality or a way of being – not so different from performing myself – while other times he feels more like *a character*, a fiction I’m trying to project into the world. This is fine by Silvio: she makes clear that the categories overlap in all sorts of places, for example in body-as-puppet media like cosplay. Rather than supplanting performance, animation just provides an alternative way of thinking about identities, and worlds of identities, as collective projects that are simultaneously ours and not ours:

We can choose how to animate our worlds, but others must live in them, and vice versa. Your fictional characters, your gods, your identities – they are not yours. They come from and belong to no one and everyone. They have their own lives.³²

Characterization

This de-individuation of character is a critical point of animation studies and situates it in a larger effort to question the idea of the natural self. Bruno Latour in his actor-network framing, for instance, portrays the self as just another assemblage pushed into motion by other actants.



Arven, Diggum and Gurrblowl, *The Pearls of Lutra*

If you still believe groupings exist ‘by themselves’, for instance the ‘individual’, just try to remember how much labor had to be done before each of you could ‘take your life into your own hands’. How many admonitions from parents, teachers, bosses, partners, and colleagues before we learned that we had better be a group of our own (the ego)? And how quickly we forgot that lesson.³³

³² Silvio 2019, 208.

³³ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32.



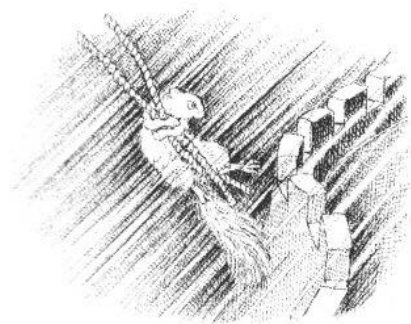
The grown-ups who told me to be myself did it only too well. I found a self I liked and never looked back. I wore the character with self-awareness, but not self-awareness in the sense that implies falseness or overacting. It was more as though I identified the kind of friend I would most value knowing in the world, and decided to try and be him. I decided I would be good, which is the kind of decision one has to make at the age of nine, but specifically I decided to be a good squirrelthief, and the character has persisted because a good squirrelthief is something more than just good; he is animate.

Characterization also makes things fun, a power that shouldn't be underestimated. Fun is intersubjective, collaborative work, involving a play between both my projection and the agency with which others receive it. I have been slow to learn that and take it seriously because I so dislike the idea of performing with my body. I've tended to think of personal presentation in terms of vanity, and still have to remind myself that it is not selfish because it has no meaning absent the social. Clothing, I remember again, is costume; style is a contribution to shared worlds, shared utopias, shared fun. And style is just one element of characterization.

Being, or animating, the squirrelthief is many other things too: sitting in trees; having good balance; taking an interest in strangers; staying serene in chaos; being certain that everything can be worked out; being ready with a tool or a trick; eating anything and everything; harmless thievery; living out of a suitcase; using salvaged and cobbled-together things forever; being able to find food anywhere;³⁴ having lots of secrets and revealing them casually; singing with abandon; raising a conspiratorial eyebrow; never losing enthusiasm; moving nimbly and surely. Sometimes I actually succeed at these things and sometimes I don't come close, and that's okay. The actions are only gestures toward meaning that lies elsewhere.

Meaning, feeling, meaning

Characterization is work, and it is paid with the token known as character – an ambiguously placed token that we give each other and also give ourselves. What that token marks is nothing less than the form of value called meaning. The token of meaning is character because in a work of narrative a character is someone who means something. This definition also translates to the other kind of character, the kind we have. That character indexes the presence of, and our access to, meaning.



Gael Squirrelking, *The Bellmaker*

I understand if meaning sounds like a very big form of value to bring into an essay on YA novels and animation. Meaning can appear large as the sun, like some kind of ultimate value-behind-all-value, but it's not so different from other forms of value. Like others, it is linguistically two-faced and it is charged with an inner paradox. At one moment meaning is innate (what does it mean?), then it's something we project on the world (what do you mean?).

³⁴ I realize I mentioned food twice in this list. Anyone who ever picked up a Redwall book seems to remember how extraordinarily food-centric they are, and that might correlate.



When *you mean*, it comes from somewhere very particular. On an individual level our most firmly held meanings come to us through feelings. When I opened *Mossflower* at a young age, I knew it meant something to me because I felt it. That's how style and taste work; that's faith; that's love. So where do the feelings come from? On an individual level, feelings hit us with force because they are meaningful. This is the irresolvable that invests character with value: meaning derives from feeling, while feeling derives from meaning. It feels right for me because it is right; it is right because it feels right. Each precedes the other, recursively, out of sight.³⁵

Such is the view from the individual mind, anyway. On a broader field, all meaning is social – and so is all feeling. At the intersection of much larger flows they collide in each of us. These flows are the raw material we animate, and what animates us.

Sterile meanings

In the years after I invented the squirrelthief, his meaning developed through two adaptations to new environments. The first was moving to India, where I carried along Redwall as an appropriated piece of a culture that I was otherwise pleased enough to leave behind. Here, too, my identification with a North American rodent was an acknowledgement to myself of being Kansas born and bred. It was a small act of self-acceptance.³⁶



Rangval and companions, *Eulalia!*

The second move was to the internet, in its early heady years when be-what-thou-wilt was the whole of the law. Online there was nothing remarkable about a whimsical avatar and a little light squirrel play. I could have gone a whole lot deeper, in fact, coming of age as I did among furies and otherkin who took their characterization very seriously indeed. But I didn't; my uncomplicated identification with the squirrelthief just didn't demand any validation or expression beyond the expression I gave it in daily life. He was always a presence, never a yearning.

If that lack of desire for more makes the squirrelthief seem like a sterile character, that is only one of the ways in which that sterility manifests. He was and is immature, stuck in a YA world, barely masculine, asexual. The squirrelthief is also the animation of my asexuality, and not only asexual but, as we would write on the internet, *asexy* – a doubled-back characterization that upends sexually oriented meanings and feelings and queers the idea of sterility.

³⁵ Meaning and feeling do not rephrase the ancient division between reason and emotion. If we choose to uphold such a duality, then both meaning and feeling mostly fall on the side of emotion. Reason doesn't enter here much at all.

³⁶ Squirrel to me meant the Western fox squirrel, *Sciurus niger rufiventer*, rather than the *S. vulgaris* of Jacques's Albionian fauna. I did, though, also enjoy learning about the exploits of India's palm squirrel *Funambulus palmarum*.



Because asexuality upholds the unfinished as whole. Like a-anything, it is not an absence but a subversive effort. It can oppose its referent head-on, or it can queer by bringing out the opposite always already within, the fact that the sexually oriented are simultaneously disoriented. My asexual squirrelsona is the immature assaulting bastions of manhood, if only by stealing in through the cellars like a thief.

Fun as theft

Everything I put into character aims to avoid meaning's negative value, the generic. When I am unhappy with myself in social settings, it may be because I've made a fool of myself, but almost worse is when I catch myself being generic: having formulaic, procedural conversations that spin out like simple equations. Other times I am disappointed because I have regarded other people as generic and missed what they might have shown me.



Dwink, Doomwyte

The Redwall books were also lined with generic elements, and they became notoriously formulaic after the first six or eight. The best defense I can make is that it was all just backdrop for the characters, who at least aspired to be more. I feel that aspiration.

In film animation, the difference can be visible: important characters have many hours of labor sunk into the movement of each limb, while background extras might be generic sketches with few frames. The result can be similar if it's processing power that is at cost, as in a computer game. That does not, I stress, mean that some real people are generic while others possess character. A person is nobody's sketch. We are each in charge of our own limbs, and equally capable of moving them with care.

The efficiencies taken in animating generic characters are, nevertheless, evidence of the larger principle through which the generic is productive and reproductive. All senses of the word generic are relevant here. Generic forms generate more of themselves, varying on a theme like computer game grunts with their randomized bits of armor. This makes them very useful in contexts of production. The trade-off is that they only represent their genera; their individual value in terms of meaning quickly drops toward zero, unless they are re-invested by a viewer, player or fan.³⁷

Generic actions get us through our lives as people, too. Bare habitus is also highly efficient in a productive, or reproductive, context. But character, the token of meaning, is neither for production

³⁷ I note the rising phenomenon of the "adoptable" in online art communities: characters that are baked up by the dozen on simple templates and sold cheaply, often apologetically, by artists who are hard up for cash, with the idea that buyers will give them some love and personality. Jenny Nicholson argues that such a hyper-generative template aesthetic enabled the whole *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* boom market (*The Last Bronycon: A Fandom Autopsy*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fVOF2PiHnc>). On the other hand, the forces are not just commercial: there is also an erotics to the generic, linked with the erotics of collecting, and I think this has led from *MLP:FIM* to the forced templating of all popular culture in the fetish-genericism of Funko Pops.



nor reproduction. The intersubjective work of characterization isn't ultimately for anything but fun: simply a feeling, a feeling that leads back to meaning, in their endless dance.

Let's be clear – to write that character is only for fun is a big, absurd claim, and ignores trillions of dollars in very commercial value. First of all there is the productive, profitable work of *entertainment*, the business of giving people a rich environment in which to have fun. In that business animation and characterization are some of the most lucrative things in the world.

Then there is branding. Teri Silvio argues that animation has been bottled within the creative industries as a command to self-brand. This is a rehash of the way that performance became institutionalized within the late-twentieth-century service sector, subjected to “performance reviews” and “performance metrics”. Self-branding is doing something similar by subsuming the work of animation in an even more neoliberal platform economy.³⁸

These market forces powerfully orient and monetize what people already do all the time. Observe the cracks, though. In the entertainment industry, the owners of characters are forever at war with their thieving fans. Brands too can lose control of their animate avatars at any moment. And self-branding is fraught with awkwardness, especially where there is too much self showing and not enough branding. This awkwardness would be on display, for example, if I were to bring the squirrelthief to my LinkedIn profile. Observe how the age of animation almost entirely offloads the question of authenticity that gripped the age of performance – but not quite entirely. It leaves a remainder of authenticity that manifests as something negative and too vulnerable. Maybe we can recognize our most “authentic” character, then, by the way it embarrasses us.

This slightly embarrassing, unmarketable part of character is the part that I boldly claim is only for fun. That it can be trapped back into the market as consumption is simply the way of capital. It can also dodge the trap, nimbly and surely. It can return straight to meaning.

This is true even though, or because, fun itself is a dishonest rogue. The root of the word fun lies in cheating people. The same can be written about another word that once stood for counterfeit money and other forms of theft: queer. Famously, everything queer steals and repurposes from the heteronormative city-by-night. Both the queer and the fun refuse the terms of economy in service to meaning and feeling, which need reference no other values or tokens.

Thus I maintain that fun need not be production, or reproduction, or even consumption. Fun is theft. A squirrelthief lives from the wealth of others, appropriating it as fun.

³⁸ Silvio 2019, 39–40.



So why *Mossflower*?

I never intended to get very deep into the Redwall books and their themes in this essay (there is only so deep to go before one comes out the other side), but reading some critical writing from other Redwall fans who grew up and went to grad school has raised some points. I end by returning to one of these.



Sister Rosabel, *Taggerung*

I long ago observed that my friends who got into Redwall tended to bond with whichever book they read first, so I never thought much about why *Mossflower* was the one that spoke to me. Reading a recent thesis by Marie Bliemeister made me reconsider:

Although there is no explicitly Christian message to the story, *Mossflower* is a transitional story between the purely secular *Martin the Warrior* and the superficial religious organization of *Redwall*. Within this text, Jacques presents a shift in the spiritual perspective that brings the woodlanders closer to an established community.³⁹

This reading should be taken within the understanding that Jacques never had a religious agenda as such. He just took Medieval trappings from wherever he could find them, including around the edges of Medieval belief systems and monastic Christian visions of utopian community.

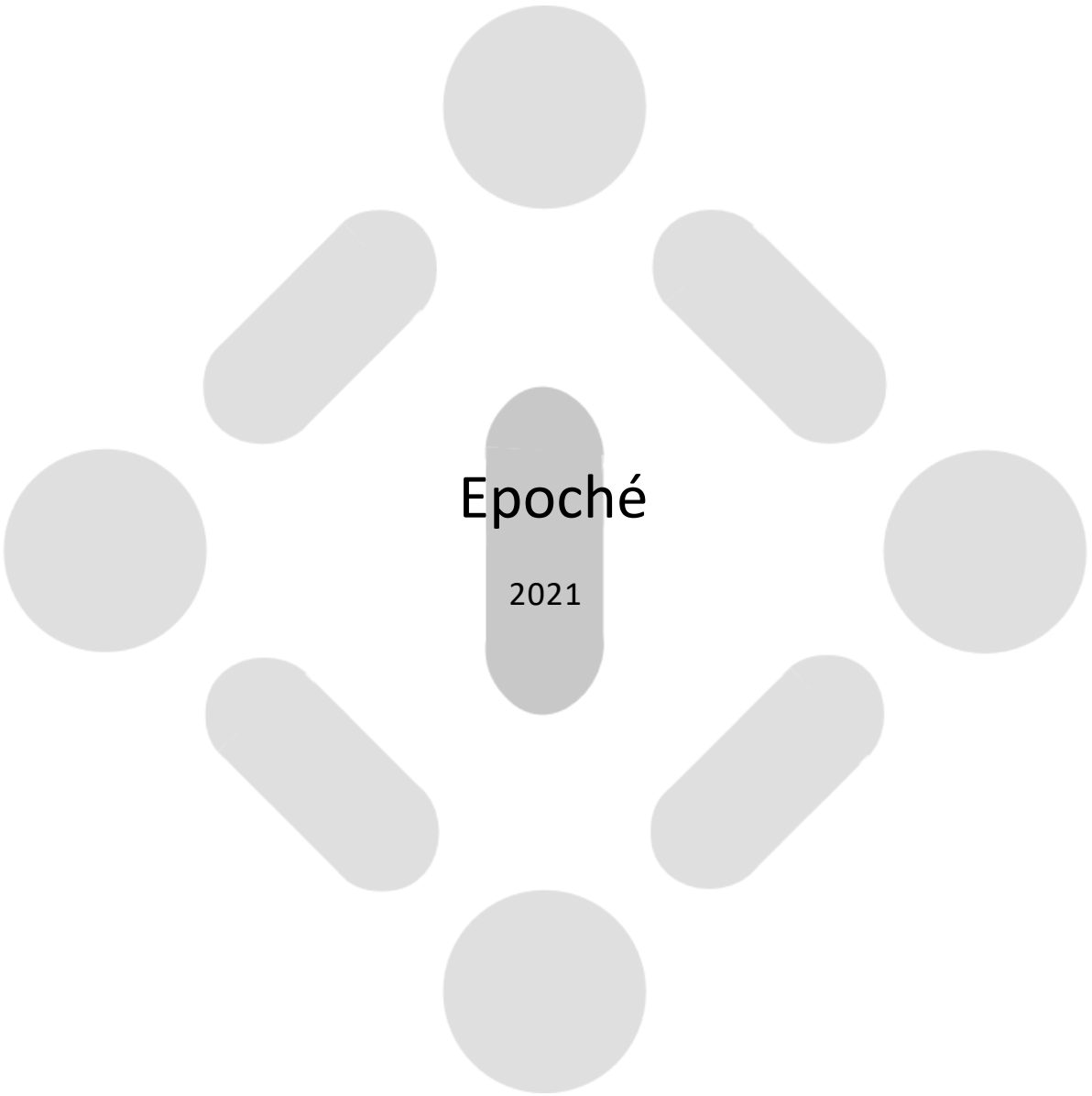
What Bliemeister raises is simply that *Mossflower* was the only book – arguably out of all 22 Redwall novels – in which something really changes. In others, a danger is overcome and order is restored. Redwall Abbey's order is a seductive order of feasts and long summers, but also a utopia laced with uncomfortable codes and conformities.⁴⁰ Compared with this, *Mossflower* is revolutionary. In it a longstanding feudal power is brought down, questing characters encounter strange and deep clefs of meaning for the first time, and the woodlanders liberate themselves and refigure themselves as a community of peace.

Mossflower was the book I liked because it was a book about social becoming, while the others, however many times I might have read them, all ended back where they began, in static norms. In *Mossflower* everything was up for grabs. Gonff the mousethief was the character who really understood that. He hardly differentiated between the necessities of getting the plot done – freeing Mossflower Woods – and grabbing moments of freedom and connection where he could get them, just being himself. I started there with an insistence that a sterile but animate character can also engage in social becoming, and I too just wanted to put meaning, feeling, or at least fun behind everything I did.

³⁹ Marie A. Bliemeister, "From Wanderer to Warrior: Martin's Journey to Sainthood in Brian Jacques's Redwall Series," *Electronic Theses and Dissertations* (2019), <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/1930>

⁴⁰ Class, gender and post-empire Britishness in the first novel *Redwall* are well explored by Holly Blackford, "The Writing on the Wall of *Redwall*," *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, edited by Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry (London: Routledge, 2003), 89–106.

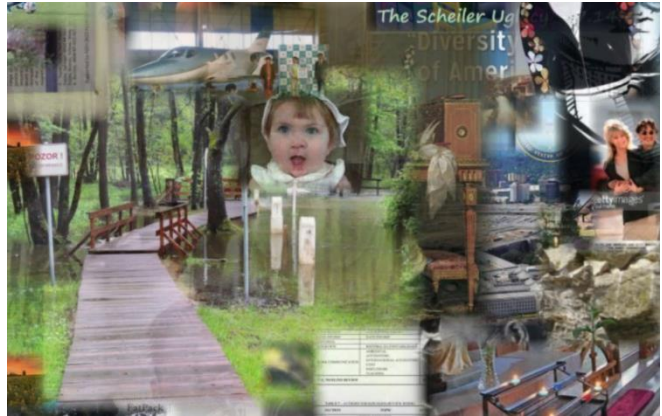




Epoché

2021

Epoché



Webcollage, <https://www.jwz.org/webcollage/collage.html>

When I was in college, and it was a particularly freewheeling college, but this probably goes for many colleges, we had a joke that was almost a rule: as any given classroom discussion wore on, the probability of a student asking “but what is truth, anyway?” approached 1. It sometimes seemed like this circular ontological turn was the only reason we were even in college in the early 2000s. The professors tired of it (even if they bore some of the blame), yet the students never did.

I laughed from the back of the table, but I wasn’t above that sort of thing myself. I even wrote a paper while studying in China where I made a sort of vulgar-postmodernist case for fiction as the only good way to write about anything.⁴¹ I typed:

Certainty is not a solid thing, it’s the black space surrounding that thing that blocks out all other possibilities. Cultural certainty keeps us apart, moral certainty destroys untold lives, and scientific certainty eats away at our whole planet. But we as a species are almost psychologically incapable of being uncertain. Such a state leads to cognitive dissonance, which quickly ends in either a satisfying re-balancing of certainties or complete mental breakdown. The only way we can really bypass these defenses and express a “maybe” is when we embed it in a clear untruth: a story.

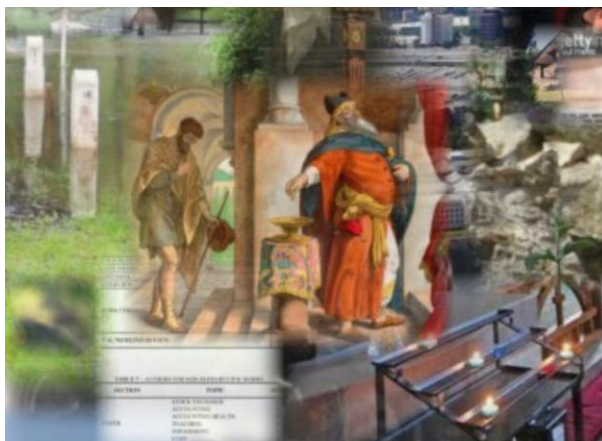
I was sharing my papers online at the time, and one of my religiously-minded relatives was worried enough to send an email asking if I was feeling all right and if I needed to talk about my doubts.

⁴¹ Funnily enough, at least one professor did try to teach us postmodernism proper that same semester, but did such a bad job that we all came out hating it.



I promise this is not an essay about truth

Epoché is a Greek word usually translated as *suspension of judgment*, once trendy among the classical Skeptics. I'm quite sure I also learned it in college. I took it as an academic stamp on a commitment to non-commitment that I'd always harbored – a desire for a wide degree of unpindownability and a feeling for all spaces of potential. It is not a word I use much anymore, not even in the privacy of my own head, because it still has the cheap taste of those classroom discussions, but it stays with me as a recognition.



So no, this is not an essay about the nature of truth; it's just a short reflection on what it means to try and live in epoché. At this point I am less interested in the truth of one thing or another, and more interested in the practical consequences one incurs when one seeks a comfortable seat on the knife-edge of uncertainty between ideological commitments.

It was never really necessary for me to go all the way back to ancient Greece for this concept, as my interest came during a long revival of Skeptical philosophies. I suspect that a portion of the “irony” our generation was miscredited with was really something more like epoché. As, for instance, Richard Tarnas argued in 1991, the basic intuitions of Skepticism had re-emerged from the substrata of modern thought as tools for living through postmodernity.⁴² Or what may have been the cooling ashes of postmodernity by the early 2000s; I'm not really sure.

It was a messy intellectual environment, and it was confused even more at that point by groups popping up around the internet taking on a staunch rationalist crusade under the banner of “scientific skepticism” – an exceedingly judgmental version that didn't have much to do with epoché at all.⁴³ Considering everything going on, it seemed safest for me to go to the source and assume that Sextus Empiricus et al. had figured it out well enough.⁴⁴

⁴² Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (Ballantine, 1991).

⁴³ That seems to have been instigated by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and their *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine.

⁴⁴ If there was one contemporary philosopher who grabbed my attention at this time, it was John Gray and his grim *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (Granta, 2003). Revisiting that book now makes me realize how much of this was really just my version of an edgy phase.



What makes the universe smaller

What did I even gain from this commitment to the knife-edge, anyway? I have always been plenty curious and hungry for understanding, and was raised with straightforward ties to a worldview of Darwin and Discover Magazine and whatever museum I'd happened to visit. I did basically believe in things.

But there is another value beyond belief and understanding, and that is possibility. My recognition of epoché is a recognition of possibility as a form of value in its own right.

That value is invested by the irresolvable riddle that learning makes the universe larger but truth makes it smaller. The most expanded universe one can live in is a universe of possibilities, where one refuses the need for certainties – just one of the most basic human needs – and is content to learn, and learn, and learn, without ever fully buying in. That wish kept me in a peculiar process that could look like, but was really the polar opposite of, a search for truth.

I simply wanted to look at and know things, *anything*, without the risks of being right or wrong. As in my college paper, part of this was an orientation towards fictions and mythologies as valid forms of knowledge without the consequences of judgment. These were good for holding things at arm's length, which was usually just as far away as I wanted them. It didn't matter to me, you or the universe if I thought the Red Ranger was the worst Power Ranger, or whatever. All fictions merely refer to language as the one medium that can touch the indeterminate.

What no doubt seems awfully woolly thus far does, in fact, have very practical outcomes for how I picked my way through life. To see that, it helps to move from the underlying value of possibility to its token, which I identify as *access*. With that token the value circulates in, and is awarded by, a mazelike social field of gatekeepers who guard against those who judge.

This is what the place I called "the universe" really constituted: a social cosmos in which judgments, or truths, could bar entry to whole miniature galaxies. If I judged, I was closing the door to a genre of music, or a (sub)culture, or a way of seeing the world, or a room few people might have the chance to enter; if I made my judgment heard, the gatekeepers would close it for me. So I prided myself less in the company I kept and more in my ability to keep *any* company. Even better, to move between companies – talking to activist squatters at lunch and then joining outrageous businessmen for tea.

Access was the ability to consume any food or idea or media and know it wouldn't hurt me. It was having no fear for the seductions of the other side, safe in the understanding that the other side is just as wrong. It was taking a stance only when I knew the nearest emergency exit. It was wandering a foreign supermarket. It was making the familiar strange and the strange stranger. It was never accepting routine in any form, because I should have to ask every day why I'm doing what I'm doing. In the embrace of epoché, the only thing unbearable is the threshold moment, when I'd

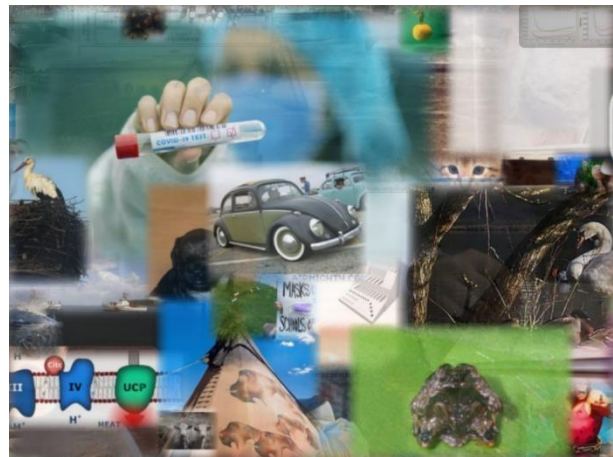


see myself taking a step off the knife-edge and severing possibilities. But usually the moment would pass and I would still be able to see across. If I could count on anything it was that there were no unmixed attributes, so everything was always at least a little bit right and a little bit wrong.

On the surface all this should have equipped me to become a good anthropologist, but I doubt that it did. Epoché could have allowed me to escape into the lives of others, as I wanted, but it just as often stopped me. At its worst, it left me with an overdeveloped sense for hypocrisy. Nothing would jump out at me so instantly as a self-contradiction by a person of great integrity. But that wasn't judgment, either; I'd just smile to myself, content in seeing failures shine through. Skepticism shaded into cynicism, and perversely, my suspension of judgment left me with a black heart of chaos.⁴⁵

Max's bargain

One of my best college friends, who we can call by his sometimes-nickname of Max, shared a lot of my sensibility. We would go for long walks. At the end of college we both ended up in New York, and we would walk and talk there too. We had a habit of each following the other so neither of us was actually leading, and even if we started with a destination, we would keep going block after block until we hit the river.



On a walk like that one day, somewhere out around Alphabet City, one of us (I don't recall which) posed a hypothetical bargain. It went like this: What would you do if given the opportunity to forfeit your bodily existence altogether, and become an incorporeal observer, going anywhere you wanted to go and seeing anything you wanted to see, forever into the future? It wasn't a very original idea, I admit, but our responses to it were striking. As soon as the bargain was laid out, we both jumped on it, agreeing that we would absolutely take the deal. Then it took another block or two to realize what we had just said. We had both intuitively accepted a horrific idea: a boundless and endless existence of watching people, generation after generation of them, make the same mistakes and repeat the same patterns, which we would come to see more and more clearly without being able to do anything about them, until the predictability of human life and death would blur into a nothingness about which we would certainly lose the ability to care. We were shocked and a bit embarrassed by our willingness to entertain that fantasy, and we didn't like what it suggested about either of us.

Later on I lost touch with Max. He left the country, and then I left the country, and he never answered the last few emails I sent him. Neither of us were ever on Facebook. He is just one among many friends I have lost contact with, and the possible reasons are many – if reasons are even needed. In my mind, anyway, the explanation is simple. Max found a chance and took the bargain. As I live out my years, he's out there, observing, and I will never know if he's come to regret it yet.

⁴⁵ It also made me an appallingly equivocating writer who strings together whole paragraphs of *buts*, *however*s and *nevertheless*s. I've been fighting that habit for years and there are still 17 *buts* in this essay.



The second third

If the observer's bargain was an extreme fantasy of epoché, of seeing and learning without touching or being touched by the world, then confronting it in that form may have been where I began to turn away. Even if Max didn't.



Some years later, I turned thirty-three. And four months after that, I was amused by the idea that I was turning $33\frac{1}{3}$. Although I didn't do anything to celebrate the fractional birthday it did have a slight effect on me. I am not a fan of fencing my life up into stages or ages; however, I do enjoy dividing things into threes. Starting from the generous assumption that I will live to be a hundred years old (and why not?), I started to think of everything before that day as my life's first third.

This was, probably, a flimsy excuse for trying to make some changes in my mindset at a time when I just happened to feel like it. Be that as it may, it was one of the steps in the reflective and introspective process that this and my other essays continue. And for my $33\frac{1}{3}$ rd birthday, I reflected on epoché as a recognition of a mode in which I had lived my life... during its first third, at least. From that lookout point it seemed like it had been a pretty good way to go. It gave me the benefits of many years of free learning without trapping me into many restraints or bad judgments. If I had abdicated moral responsibility at times, I hoped I hadn't done so more than the average person, and I hoped I had done little harm.⁴⁶

But what if, as just another hypothetical, what if I had learned enough to have a reasonably good grip on things now? What if I could do something else now – what would be my guiding principle up to age $66\frac{2}{3}$? That was the question I was left with, and rather still am.

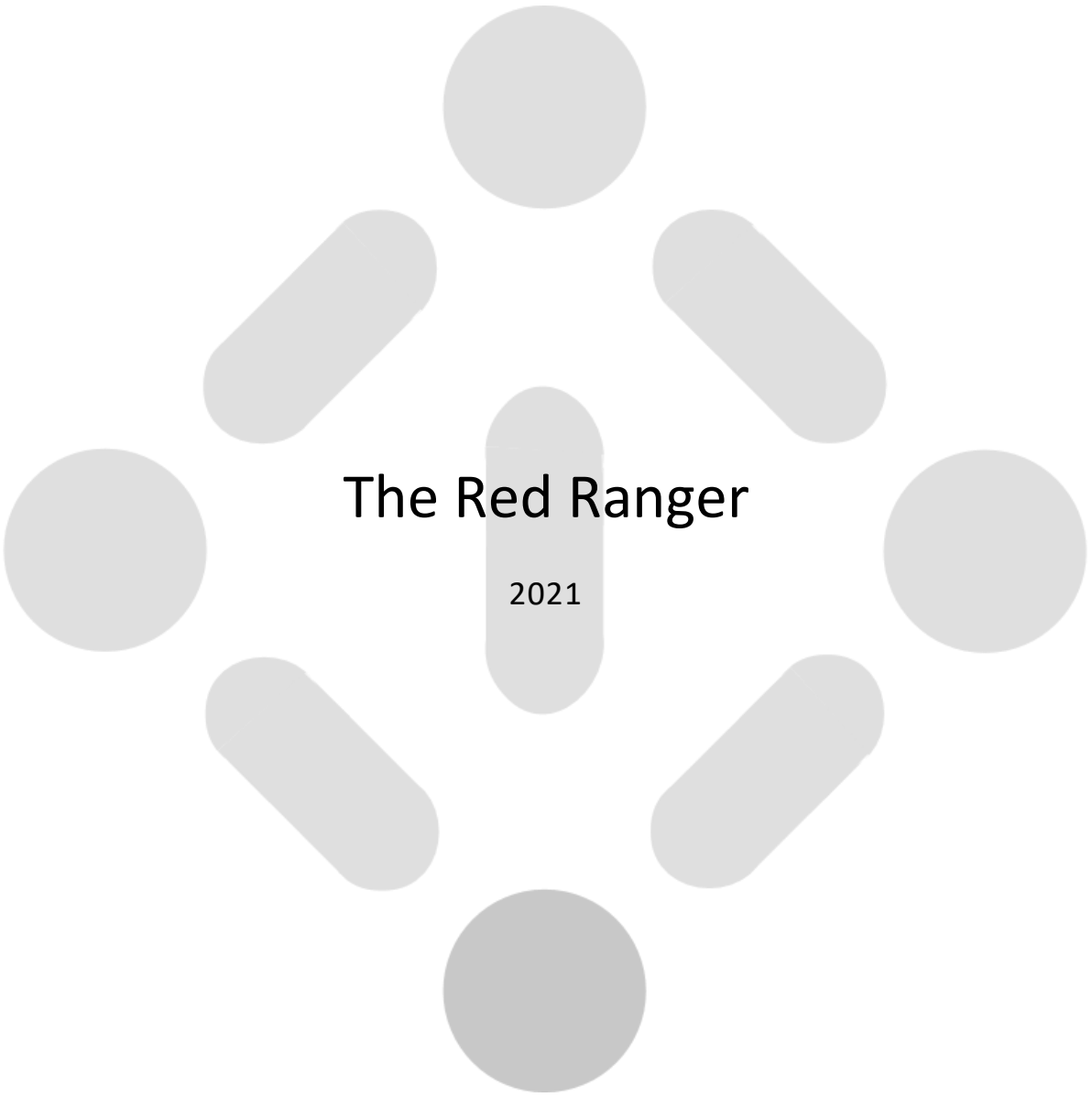
The really radical jump isn't to enshrine my ignorance of good or bad courses of action, but to consider the possibility that everything I have learned through those years of observation is, maybe, a source of judgment I can trust. Then what if simply doing what seems right actually is a guide? What if I already have hard-won answers, and the rest is just ordinary, everyday fear of fucking up?

How would I know?

I still don't know. It was one thing to decide to turn myself away from epoché, and maybe I am more judgmental now, or at the very least judgmental of my younger self, as you can see. But possibility is still a treasure. And epoché is still with me here, the air bubble at the center of my moral compass.

⁴⁶ Epoché hadn't even stopped me from meeting and marrying (and I write this with all love) a very judgy person. She may have softened me up a bit in the last fifteen years too.





The Red Ranger



MM Power Rangers Red Ranger Postit by Shadovsky

I care about as little as I could possibly care about Power Rangers. The franchise comes from a place and time and set of values that were never really mine. I have never watched an episode of the show, *Mighty* nor *Morphin* nor any other kind.⁴⁷ Still, something about Power Rangers bothers me to this day. Here is almost my entire knowledge of them: there are usually five, sometimes six; they are different colors and have different abilities, weapons and robots, yet they are first and foremost defined by being a team; they beat monsters as a team; all of them are important; still, most of the time the Red Ranger is their leader.

I prepared for this essay by continuing not to watch any Power Rangers. With my almost complete lack of knowledge and interest, I look to the Red Ranger only as a representative of a larger class of cultural figures: those who belonged to diverse, multi-talented squads, but were casually and naturally centered as heroes, leaders and relatable surrogates for their audience – 90s American white boys like me. They ruled our broadcast television, and they truly took over the screens as my fellow boys picked up their video game controllers.

This recurring figure is cereal-box cheap and seems like he should be easy for me to flip past to another channel. I name him with the name of the Red Ranger, a character from a show I've never even watched, to insist that he's not *my* cultural baggage. Most of my feelings towards him are bored disdain. Still, somehow, this red-coded, male-coded, American-coded archetype that surrounded my youth still shadows me, my least favorite recognition.

So I won't tune him out. First-among-heroes characters like the Red Ranger open up a bunch of stuff, anyway, that could get more interesting. I think they break down most interestingly into three aspects: they are *Mighty*, they are *Morphin*, and they are *Powerful*. I'll take each of these in turn.

⁴⁷ Nor *Super Sentai*. However, it is crucial to understand the localization process that produced *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* out of *Super Sentai*. The creators took the villains, monsters, and the scenes of masked Rangers fighting them, from this Japanese show; scenes with the Rangers out of costume were shot in the US with American "teen" actors. This maintained the foreignness of the Japanese elements (significantly the villains) while replacing one set of complex cultural meanings with another.



The Mighty hero

All of the Power Rangers were heroes, and popular ones, but still lost in a comically crowded field of heroes that has only crowded in further since those days, because heroism is the cultural logic of neoliberalism.⁴⁸ The logic goes like this: There is no right amount of effort for an individual agent to put into production; there is only as much effort as possible. To maximize value addition and extraction everyone should work with all the vigor they can, and while this will seldom be the vigor of someone who is Mightily saving the world in a time of peril, that represents the top of a scale of effort that every free agent should always be climbing. Thus: give it everything you've got, never give up, shoot for the stars, do the impossible, and so on, no matter what terrible pointless job you might have. It may often seem downright unrewarding, and that's why, as we so often insist in our culture, the world *needs* heroes.

I don't think it works very well. Heroism has never been cheaper than in the ages of mass media and mass content, and with this its inspirational potential has depreciated. The most towering of heroes, whether wholly fictional or some versions of real individuals, are trucked out endlessly just to help people convince themselves to get out of bed in the morning. This over-exposure wears heroes down, too; it's worth observing how the stories that carry the ostensibly supreme civilizational values of honor, justice and bravery so fast slip into the registers of mindless entertainment, guilty pleasures and nerdy pursuits. In their unrestrained proliferation the Mighty are always Morphing into self-parodying genre conventionality.

That isn't just a cheapening of the form or ideology of heroism, I think. It's pegged to a larger inflation economy in superlativity. Heroes inspire to greatness – Mightiness – and not just to be great but to be the greatest. This orientation towards superlativity as a value in itself needs explaining, because there is nothing normal or obvious about it. Centering extremes is a contradiction in terms that, outside of religious thought perhaps, isn't necessarily good for much. The world's strongest person (with or without the infrastructure that tracks and certifies that fact) is just a person with a certain amount of strength, and like the rest of us, the situations in which their available amount of strength is relevant only come up so often. Most of the time there is a functional range of strength to use, or the right speed to drive, or the right size for a sandwich to be.

It's therefore a significantly strange ideology that says what can be superlative should be superlative, or to the greatest extent strive to be and present itself as such, in every situation. The easy explanation is that it's an internalization of the limitless growth envisioned by capital: never settle for less when there can be more, and never admit to less when you can claim more. It might also be a sick ideology. I don't think American culture really began dealing with its consequences until the Trump administration, when the very real harm it did to the English language made its other forms of damage impossible to ignore. The word "great" will never sound the same again – I hope.

⁴⁸ Whereas superheroism is the cultural logic of neofascism, and, I guess, neofeudalism too. I don't doubt that superhero universes offer plenty of their own Red Ranger archetypes, but I might know even less about Marvel franchises than Power Rangers, because I find them so reprehensible that I'd rather watch Riefenstahl.

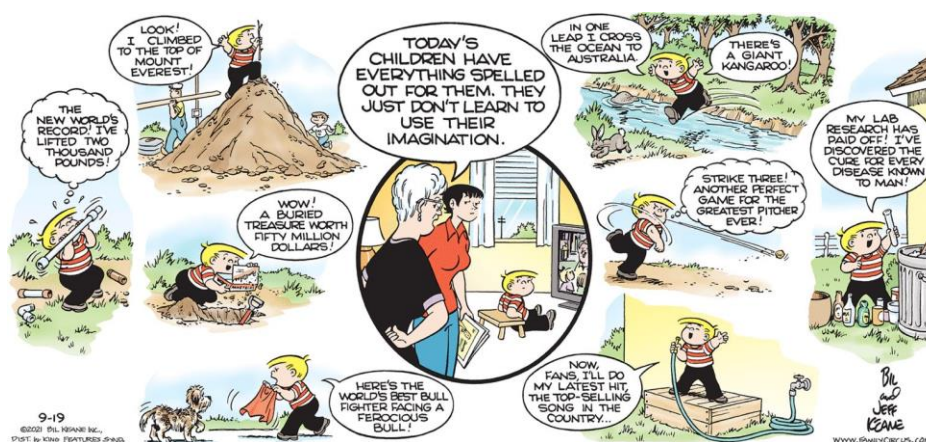


Anyway, setting superlativity aside, I think the basic form of value behind the recognition of the Red Ranger is not greatness but success – something more modest and contextual. The Red Ranger leads, fights and succeeds, in whatever way the episode asks him to. Sure, success is a low bar for a hero. But in this world of watered-down, dubbed-over heroics, it's the criterion that matters. It's what ties my destiny as, say, a freelance editor with the Hero's Journey of pop myth. Success is also what matters to the market, because the market defines the success state. The particular definition of success as financial or cultural windfall – to “become a success” – is the youngest definition, coming out of the aspirations of the 1880s. Then and now, the market decides what it means.

In most cultures, boys are supposed to be brought up to develop specific kinds of skills and abilities that they are likely to use in adult life. It has become quite difficult in our culture to guess what those might be. Evidently, then, the major ability demanded by neoliberal manhood is not a skill as such, it's a belief in being able to do anything. Success here is a form of value so Powerful that it outshines, in imagination, the qualities that are necessary to achieve it; it's an ideological bat signal that leaves everyone to eventually have to figure out on their own how to follow it, using the clues embedded in rehashed and rebooted heroic myths.

I suspect this is what makes many American boys so distinctly terrible to be around. I was recently around a few of them, and was reminded of the way they only speak in superlatives. It is also quite difficult to differentiate the times they are using their imaginations, like everyone always tells them to, from the times they really do believe that they are capable of anything. Hero worship and emulation easily Morphs into a maniacal self-confidence. Strangest of all, adults get on board by measuring the “strength” of imagination itself in quantitative terms, so boys are congratulated for dreaming and talking in Munchausenian superlatives.

This suggests that those adults think big ideas and big ambitions pave the way to big success, which is *an* idea about the world, but not a very compelling one, I think. The evidence for it could be better. What big ideas and big ambitions can easily do, instead, is create an insidious form of competition – competition that isn't a battle royale (or game of Fortnite or what-have-you), but rather a struggle by each boy and man and man-boy to maintain his sense of being at the center of the story. What starts as imaginative play becomes a frantic fight for existence as a meaningful point of consciousness who has been told that he is the protagonist of his life. And that is, of course, only to speak of the able white cis boys out there. What it does to everyone else's life is another story.



A distressingly accurate portrayal of what young American boys are like all the time



The Morphin norm

It's hard to think of a player select screen in the kind of game that has a player select screen without the default hero – male, all-American, probably wearing red or sometimes blue.⁴⁹

There might be a baseball cap; if there is a weapon it's a sword; if there is an element it's fire; if there is a dinosaur it's their king, the eternal *rex*. This character is usually signaled as the all-rounder, for players who just want to play the normal game without special traits and abilities. Here, the reason for these characters, and the reason it's been so hard for creators to move past them, is clear: they are marketable

more than pedagogic. The publisher wants to know that there's a character the player will identify with, and the player is always (at least until very recently) imagined as someone like me. What really defines Red Rangers, then, isn't that they are the best and strongest among their peers, but that they have names like boys I went to school with – Jason Lee Scott, Tommy Oliver, Conner McKnight.



Mighty Morphin Power Rangers (SNES, 1994)

In this perspective, the Red Ranger Morphs from an aspirational hero to a norm, or really a whole constellation of norms that triangulate the place in the world that was mine by birth. I don't only see the Red Ranger with his sword and tyrannosaur, but a whole life: a life of cereal and cartoons, root beer, gadgets and sunglasses, the surety of life as one fully actualized person in a world built to my measure. The Fourth of July. Halloween. The 90s. There's nostalgia of course, and a lot more besides. It comes to me as a hallucination of another life, a timeline in which I never left Kansas at the age of 11, in which I made all the best default choices and now have a house and straight marriage and probably stream on Twitch on the weekends or something. It's an imaginary life, but a real world. I can visit it occasionally and spy on it very easily – I do so, in moments of weakness, on awful websites like Reddit and Imgur where I can see into any dorm room or backyard or suburban kitchen and the sheltered notions of value that people keep there.

Like most things to do with that other life, this peeking registers in my mind as some sort of guilty pleasure, even though there is little pleasurable about it and it usually either makes me mad or depressed, and even though hanging out with those people in real life quickly alienates me to my core. That's the thing about norms: it's not always easy to tell the difference between what I secretly enjoy and what I suspect myself of keeping secret, even if, when it really comes down to it, I don't enjoy it at all. It's also the thing about values: values don't tell me what I think, only what I think I should think, including and maybe especially after I reject them. Just the thought that I could flip the switch at any moment and be living in that pepperoni-pizza world is enough that I will probably never be able to convince myself once and for all that it isn't my fate. Do I even like root beer?

⁴⁹ I realize that there are different, but related, characters in games made for Japanese gamers that are outrageously American in a more caricatured or perhaps romanticized than relatable way, which isn't exactly what I'm writing about here but is an interesting twist on it.



Success is not a value that's easily jettisoned, either. Going back further into its definitions, the second-oldest meaning (from the sixteenth century) is the accomplishment of a desired end, in the sense of: I set out to write a clear and convincing essay and I want to succeed. Therefore, as an avatar of success, the Red Ranger has hooks in me even if I don't have a competitive bone in my body and my ambitions are small. I can't close my heart to this form of value as long as I have things I want to get done; it drives me on, from stubborn procrastination to determined *precrastination*. And when I do, I'm still bound by the irresolvable dilemma that lies behind the value of success.

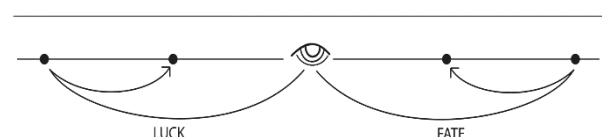
With each of its heroic tropes, society says: be fearless, be determined, be yourself, and be right. Unhappily for us, the last command is the key. To be fearlessly, doggedly, self-assuredly *wrong* is not heroic. Heroes "do the right thing," and they know it's the right thing because they are heroes. The ideology of heroism posits that the main problem in the world is a lack of people with the grit and determination to do what needs doing, rather than a lack of clarity on what needs doing and what needs undoing. Along with centering superlativity, a truly broken culture must be one that values persistence in achieving an end over any knowledge of what the consequences of that end will be.

Here's the dilemma. Outside of the walls of heroic fiction, whatever the token of success is (there are many, but we can group them within the family of *reward* or *fortune*), it can only be bestowed by the future. It's the irresolvable temporality of the situation – evaluating the present based on what the past tells us about the judgment of the future – that makes a value of success.

David Graeber (who I don't consider a hero but who I am, yes, about to cite twice in this essay) laid out what he called the paradox of fortune in a paper about what it means to live in history: "in a situation where the future cannot be known and the past cannot be changed and, therefore, where the unpredictable is constantly turning into the irreversible."⁵⁰ Here, *luck* is a temporal perspective through which I look at the past from a point even further past when it was still the future, and pretend that it could have gone differently than I know it did. *Fate* is a perspective in which I imagine how a future outcome will look to someone further in the future who considers it fait accompli.

Graeber used this scheme to suggest a larger project of trying to level luck and fate with lots of other approaches to the same paradox from different cultures. But I think success draws its value as an antagonist to both luck and fate. Success is how you "make your own fate", as the saying goes. If I am motivated by future success, I am motivated by something I'm imagining remembering in the future, and I have no knowledge of how my actions will set up or ruin either the outcome or the light in which I will look back and judge it.

But with a strong imagination I can see it all happen. When I do that, I'm informed by stories – stories about heroes who look like me, and who like me have their worlds built for them, only built more perfectly than mine.



"Fate and luck as temporal perspectives", figure from Graeber 2012

⁵⁰ David Graeber, *The Sword, the Sponge, and the Paradox of Performativity: Some Observations on Fate, Luck, Financial Chicanery, and the Limits of Human Knowledge*. *Social Analysis* 56, no. 1 (2012): 25–42.



The Power to lead

Sometimes, instead of the Red Ranger, I think of a TV program from the 90s that I actually do remember watching: *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*. I believed that the American Planeteer, Wheeler, was another good example of the Red Ranger archetype: in a multicultural squad of “special young people” he was the brash white leader with command of Fire.



Wheeler, American boy

Looking back in the library for the series, I was thus surprised to learn that Kwame (the LeVar Burton-voiced Earth kid) might actually have been the lead Planeteer. Maybe it says more about my own conditioned expectations as a boy that I don’t remember it that way. On reappraisal, Wheeler was semi-subversively written as kind of a dumbass, and Fire was often shown to be the least useful Power for a given situation. Then again, his all-American ignorance made Wheeler the one who got the most personal development plotlines, and there’s no disputing that he was written to be the major audience surrogate.

This wrinkle opens up other questions, like: why assume that every squad needs a leader, and why expect that the greatest hero should have that role? Because, I guess, heroes are supposed to organize themselves on generally meritocratic lines, and perhaps it’s one of their jobs to showcase the otherwise seldom encountered sight of meritocracy in action.

Meritocracy is a very funny word. It was coined in 1958 in the title of a dystopian sci-fi novel by a British Labour politician who meant it as satire on the mechanics of the postwar educational system.⁵¹ To drive the satire home he wryly combined a Latin and Greek root, which made it all the more embarrassing for him when his party went on to use the joke word seriously for decades afterwards. The linguistics point to other things that are intentionally askew about meritocracy, like the way “merit” lumps together ability and effort in a murky whole; and the temporal silliness of granting access to Power to those who *are going* to merit it. Still, the satire ran away from its creator, and there’s now an acceptance of and even a deep societal commitment to meritocracy.

The people who hold such a commitment are willing to build not just myths but whole clockwork systems in which perfect meritocracy manifests. Team sports are such attempts, and with electronic gaming these have spread beyond the limits of physical merit. Here, superlativity and (a secondary definition of) leadership converge on the leaderboards of worldwide competition, hierarchy operating with millisecond precision. With the generalization of these forms (not to mention the stated intentions of the captains of neoliberalism to gamify everything), I am tempted to use *gamers* as a label for the entire social field in which success circulates as a form of value.

⁵¹ Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958).



All of that is newish, but it's certainly not a new idea that says heroes are fit to become leaders – or rulers, even. And wherever it appears this is a naturalizing idea: when a true hero arrives, who wouldn't put them in charge? I don't see any reason to believe it is natural, though. It is too literal to think that every society picked its greatest hero to found its ruling dynasty; anthropology has a more compelling account.

In one of the last and largest books of each of their lifetimes, *On Kings*, David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins wrote reams of ideas about kingship. Among much else they argued that stranger-kingdoms are the dominant form of premodern state the world round, and perhaps the original form.⁵² Stranger-kingdoms typically originate with a heroic prince from a greater outside realm. This origin is necessary, they wrote, to keep the polity forever divided between rulers who are foreign by nature and their autochthonous subjects, mystifying the process by which a king becomes a king. That takes a whole lot of storytelling to do right, so inevitably the foreign dynastic founder is known for heroic exploits of incredible danger, and often of enormity and moral trespass too. Thus rulers are always already heroic, and the rules never have and never will apply to them.

It's surely only part of the story, but I think this is important work because of how it deflates the heroes of dynastic epics, those archetypes so compelling to Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Thomas Carlyle and Ayn Rand, unveiling them not as universal narratives but as very specific cover stories for very specific hereditary Power structures.

Of course, if these alibis are the distant origins of the tales that underlie heroic claims to leadership, then they have only survived through time because they have other uses. They are supposed to inspire later leaders to wise policy, imposing a repetitive cultural temporality with known endings that, as an answer to the paradox of fortune, is a fundamental mode of history-making.⁵³ The tales can also inspire ordinary people to apply the lessons to their own social relations, and children raised on them to embody the values of the land. One does not have to be a monarch, after all, to understand this: that it's much easier to simply be in a position of command than to have to build a case for why you should be there. You are a leader if everyone thinks you are. This is true even when it's just a matter of commanding a few friends, colleagues or Planeteers. There is no need to go on a grueling Hero's Journey to achieve every seat of authority in every given group when one can gesture to all the Heroes' Journeys that have come before and one's place in their lineage.

The legitimating legends of stranger-kings have been this and much more. Their aura could extend far beyond Powerful individuals to large groups of the chosen. They wove into Biblical themes of triumph, settler-colonial themes of adventure, and martial themes of honor. Then they were appropriated by liquid-modern capitalism as pedagogic tools to shape min-maxing gamer-subjects – every boy a little hero and a natural leader in the making. And finally, as an American teen dressed in the copied regalia and legendary battles of an obscure Japan, the Red Ranger was a stranger-king too.

⁵² David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings* (Chicago: Hau Books, 2017), 5.

⁵³ *On Kings*, 17.



After success

As I've already mentioned, success has multiple meanings: one can succeed at something one sets out to do; or one can become a success in the eyes of society, earning rewards. Then there is the third and oldest definition, going right to the Latin rootstock: to come after or overtake, as in *succession*. It's this definition that reveals how the idea of success is a mode of history-making and narration, of putting things in their proper order. Success is bringing the new into being.

Yet the failure of success to become succession is history's constant disappointment. G.K. Chesterton wrote of the heretics who would shape history: "They desired strength; and to them to desire strength was to admire strength; to admire strength was simply to admire the status quo."⁵⁴ William James, after reading this, went on his own tirade against "the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess Success.... our national disease."⁵⁵ And these were precisely the rank of literary heroes that the next generation of Brits duly grew up admiring and worshipping.

If I haven't made it obvious, I'm bored with hero worship. Out of all my recognitions, I really do feel as though I've plumbed the depths of the Red Ranger, and it's the one I would do away with. It is where I put my birth culture, masculinity, susceptibility to things I hate, and the pressure of a call to compete, dictate and dominate. The Red Ranger is the norm with a thousand generic faces.

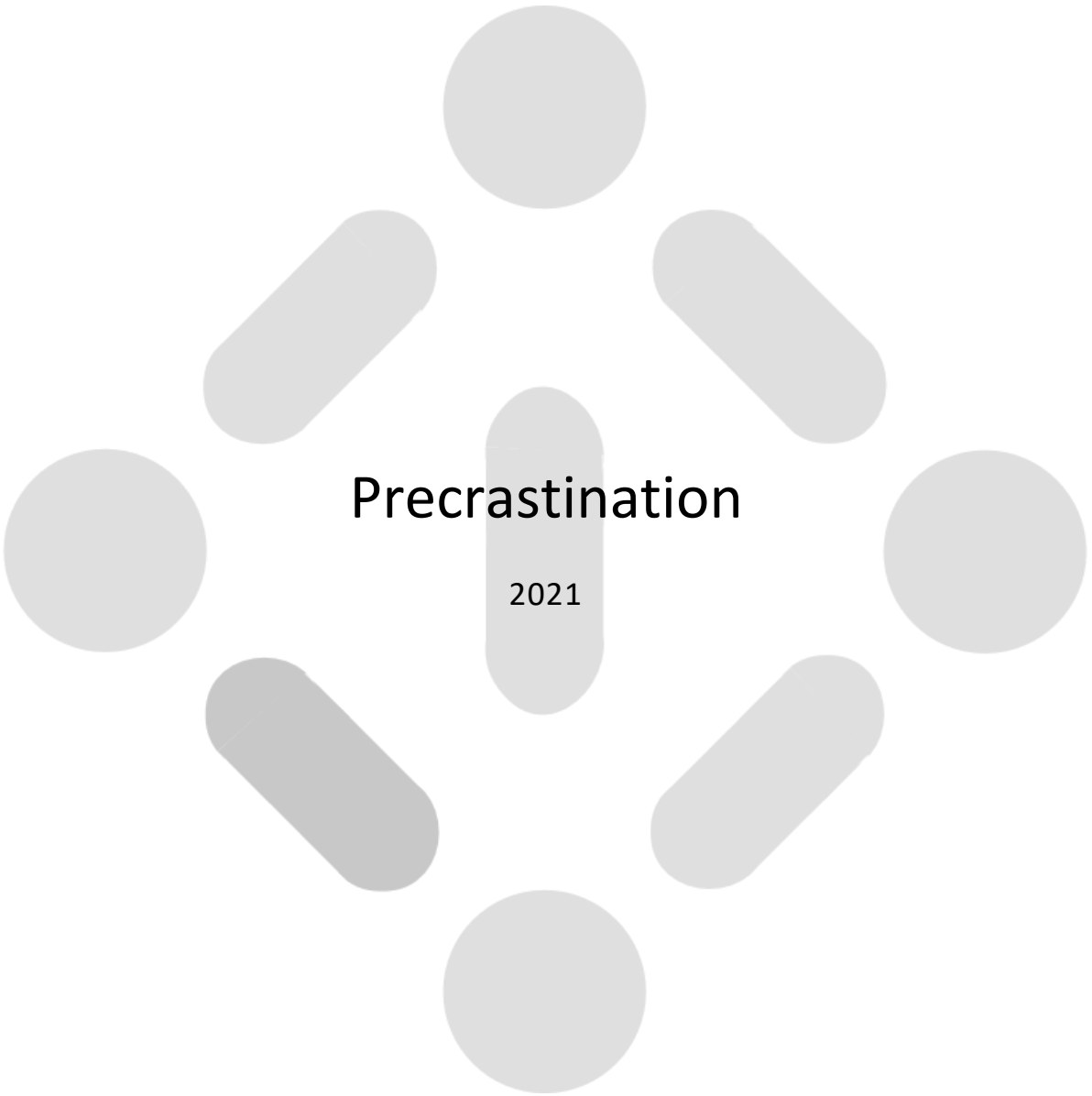
It's all so unpalatable to me that it's been rather difficult to write about. This is an essay mostly made up of ideas I had lined up pretty well before I even started, but it's been an absolute chore to sit down and compose, firstly because I find the subject matter so bad to think about, and secondly because thinking, and writing, about it puts me right back in a superlative frame of mind where I feel like I have to write the best, most Powerfully convincing essay I can. I know how much has already been written about norms and hegemony and the damage done by patriarchy to men and all of that – and that makes me feel like what I'm writing has to be better. It's as though I was prepping my notes for a live debate or a boxing match with my other self, the one with the Twitch stream. And that is the trap: to beat the Red Ranger one has to *beat* the Red Ranger. I can't just write this essay and be at peace with it. To venture onto this field is to accept the necessity of winning a test of wills.

If, as I wrote earlier, there are things I would like to succeed at, how do I extricate that from all this sweaty combat? Maybe by understanding what Morpht's combat itself, all that mortal striving and struggling, into casual entertainment for kids, namely: knowledge of the outcome. Kids didn't watch Power Rangers because they wanted to fight hard, work hard, and risk their lives. They watched because everything is easy for a Power Ranger, whose fate is always success. So it becomes necessary for me to differentiate the value of success from any feelings of being heir to success and succession. Keeping the impetus while escaping the Red Ranger means doing away with fate and the paradox of fortune. No hero's trajectory; no growing up on a life cycle from heresy to status quo; no success, maybe. This essay will never be finished, at least not in the way I would wish it to be. Like anything of true value, success has to remain precious but fundamentally unknowable.

⁵⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (1905) <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/470>.

⁵⁵ William James, letter to H.G. Wells, Sept. 11, 1906 https://gutenberg.org/files/38091/38091-h/38091-h.htm#page_259.





Precrastination

2021

Precrastination



VIP card from Jingshan Tea House, Wen'er Road No. 470, Hangzhou

When I studied in Hangzhou for a few semesters of college, we used to take whatever coursework we had to do, chapters to read, and papers to write to an exceptionally good tea shop on Wen'er Road. This was a place where one could buy a single glass of Dragon Well tea and refill it with hot water from a thermos until the leaves turned white, and easily make ten or twelve visits to the snack table up front for dragon eyes, pomelo slices and pigeon eggs. I have found few more accommodating commercial establishments in the world, and I miss it often.

We would stay for hours while the same Dao Lang CD played on repeat. We went so often that I was given a VIP card with a special discount, which I carry in my wallet to this day. Sitting at our favorite table by the window, blowing on tea, piling peels and shells and wrappers high, we would get things done. The tea shop was where we would go when we just wanted to get our curricular obligations out of the way; its mood, West-Lake-classical décor, and even its looping ethno-soft-rock soundtrack seemed to hypnotize us into productivity. I read a chunk of the literary canon in translation, fumbled with ethnographic basics, and completed a large part of two National Novel Writing Months there (writing as many as 6,000 words in a day during the first novel).

Clever as college students are, we called what we did in the tea house *precrastination*. It was not a typical case of students hunched under heavy workload: our college was laughably easygoing, and most students could get by waiting until the end of the semester before throwing their portfolios together in a brief string of late nights. We in the tea house didn't do that, though; in precrastinating we caught on to that script and flipped it. We wanted to just get it all done as soon as we had our assignments and reading lists, so we could spend the rest of our days savoring a city of mysteries.

It was in this place and time that I came to understand it as a general habit of mine, and perhaps, in recognizing it, to cement it. Precrastination put a name on it – a slapdash coinage, suitably. Definition: doing today what absolutely does not need doing before tomorrow, just so it's done.

I insisted then, and maintain now, that precrastination is not some brand of Protestant work ethic. It is a pursuit of the form of value called action, yet it's not really about doing. It's an ethic of having done.



Mind if I finish this?

Work is not the whole of this recognition, but it is the easiest entry point. Here, precastination is all about completing a project – say, writing a book or an essay. It means editing as I write so I only have to go through the manuscript once (a method I’ve backed away from as I’ve become more professional, but would still practice all the time if I could get away with it). When writing I just want to write, from start to finish,

and then send off the whole bundle of text, or save it in my archives, or (my favorite) leave it online in the public domain. Maybe to read again, some day, when much time has passed.



Life and Death 2: The Brain (DOS, 1990)

I consume the same way I produce. I’ll admit that I read many books, too, to finish them, and I’m a fast reader. Although I often watch movies and performances the same way (when I’m, say, trying to see as many versions of Hamlet as possible), I will always prefer reading, where I’m in charge of the speed. Travel, especially by myself, can also turn into a game of getting done – running through my to-do list, reaching where I want to go and doing what I’m there to do so I can get home, reflect, and tell specific people specific stories about it. Anything can fit on a to-do list, really; it’s an interesting planning tool in the way it bridges production, consumption and maintenance, which could be why it’s coming to dominate the screen era. A list is never really about doing, after all, but about crossing it off. At crossing-off there is no difference between production, consumption and maintenance. There’s only finishing, cleaning up and wiping down the counters.

Other times, I’m at a party. Most often I only remember after I get there how little I enjoy parties. But I stay, watch myself be part of it, collect things to process on the train home. I’m outside of the experience even when in it. Not because I can’t be present; it’s just that I like parties best as memories. If something completely unexpected happens there, I will surely take it in stride and show no surprise, because I’m already thinking of the party as tomorrow’s memory and the story I’ll tell.

Or it can be as simple as food, the elementary form of consumption. In my mind eating is almost synonymous with finishing food. If there is a slice left or a single dragon eye in the bowl, I will eat it. I’m sure that most of my visits to the snack table in the tea shop on Wen’er Road were to finish the last of something, and the snacks are inseparable in memory from the papers we polished off there.

Precastination takes for granted that all of these actions are production in some guise. In many cases – the most meaningful to me, maybe – the products are simply memory and the rest I feel I’ve earned. Or put another way, I am the product. So precastination is about getting to the after: the sitting around a pizza box talking about the work done, the furniture built, the night had. It’s about getting there, and about positioning myself there even while in the middle of action. If that seems to contradict words I have written elsewhere about the way I am, that’s fine. I began this piece with the tea shop to show precastination as something situated that comes and goes. I don’t always exist in this mode, and that is good because it’s useless for certain kinds of action and being, especially collective kinds. But when I do recognize it, the recognition is strong.



The name of action

I've never been strong in the upper body or good at carrying heavy things very far. Given a well-packed suitcase and a few blocks to walk, I quickly reach a point where my arm gives out and I have to put it down. A long time ago I realized that this point of exhaustion was not absolute but relative, and always seemed to come very close to my destination – in the final steps, even. So one time, finding myself in this situation, I looked farther down the street to a corner beyond where I was going, and I told myself a lie: I said *that* corner was my destination. I was feeling fine when I got to my true stopping point and revealed the con by setting down my suitcase.



Hamlet: Ein Rachedrama, 1921

I've used that trick, and similar tricks in the same spirit, ever since. If it's 4pm and I'm having a hard time getting through the last hour of my job, I pretend I'm working until 7pm. Precrastination might even have grown out of that little gimmick, because in a different way it's also about thinking past the end of my task. Instead of thinking I have a week to write a paper, I think about writing it today and tomorrow, and also about the five days I'll still have after that – which, in my imagination, will be just as busy with other and possibly more rewarding activities. I may not really be able to finish the paper in two days, and it doesn't matter. My perception of action and its difficulty is equally susceptible to my perception of where I am in its temporality, whether or not the latter is a lie.

What ties these examples together is the well-known temporal structure of action. First, there is a tense personal Elsinore within which I'm considering taking action. Then the time of doing itself. And then a forever after in which the action has been taken. Thinking past the destination shrinks the middle stage to a relative moment, a prologue to the future, and makes it seem less worthwhile to mope around in the initial palace of doubts.

As a recognition of having done, precrastination therefore refuses the value of potential, which it collapses – and simultaneously it also refuses the present tense of doing as a value in itself. It only accepts its chosen value, action, paid out in fully rounded tokens of completion, which have a worth and pleasure that tempers, or may be inseparably alloyed with, the melancholy of potential foreclosed.

To recognize this in myself is to cultivate it; certainly, thinking about it as I write this essay has quickened my steps and prompted me to do and finish dozens of other things on my to-do list in between my cozily focused hours of writing. I'm even typing these words on the clock with my job after finishing my paid work early.⁵⁶ Don't tell my employer, but I for one feel fine about taking the time I've won back to settle into a more personally rewarding task. Oh for a glass of Dragon Well tea!

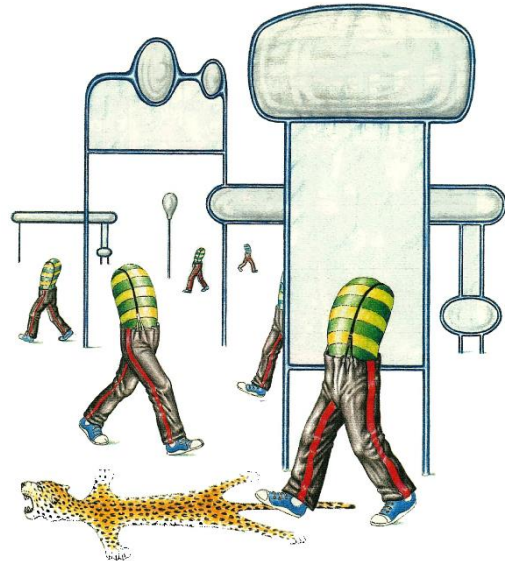
⁵⁶ Which was editing a paper on chicken slaughtering practices in Ethiopia.



Meanings at risk

Recognizing my tactic of precastination is also recognizing something more significant: what it is that's so onerous about action anyway. Don't I enjoy doing things?, I have to ask myself. And often the answer is yes. Action is always a *thing* though. It takes something.

It's clarifying to look for the negative value of action, which I propose, *pace* Hamlet, is doubt. Let's go to the etymology: doubting is doubling, a presence of twin meanings. To use the common but downright mystical idiom, doubt is being "of two minds". Why two, exactly? Possibly because there are two sides to every legal case. The word action, at least, was born as legalese; believe it or not, legal action is the original sense. To take action is to file suit, to go to court and settle the dispute between true and false. Action opposes the false face of doubt – but until the judgment falls it doesn't know which face that is.



Luigi Serafini, *Codex Seraphinianus* (1981)

Marshall Sahlins in his key pre-poststructuralist work on Polynesian histories called this bind "the dual existence and interaction between the cultural order as constituted in the society and as lived by the people: structure in convention and in action, as virtual and as actual".

In their practical projects and social arrangements, informed by the received meanings of persons and things, people submit these cultural categories to empirical risks. To the extent that the symbolic is thus the pragmatic, the system is a synthesis in time of reproduction and variation. If culture is as anthropologists claim a meaningful order, still, in action meanings are always at risk.⁵⁷

Here we run up against the irresolvable, and anthropology at its most Shakespearean. In action meanings are always at risk – and failure is only perhaps the least of these risks. This is what makes action valuable, and what makes action costly, in terms of the excess energy it demands above and beyond the bodily movements that constitute it. Risking meaning is what makes work.

This perspective also renders planning into almost a ritual practice, an epiphenomenon of action more aligned with the symbolics of convention than with action itself. If that is a big claim, it's more or less anthropological consensus now (in a time of general focus on action over other facets of culture), and to me it does ring true. I tell myself what I'm going to do, I tell others, and then I do whatever I end up doing; even if it goes as planned, it doesn't necessarily mean what I planned. The book spins out of my control. The pure good I enacted still looks good, but more of a trash good. The party is not what I expected. Everyone is stabbed or poisoned. I'm not as hungry as I thought.

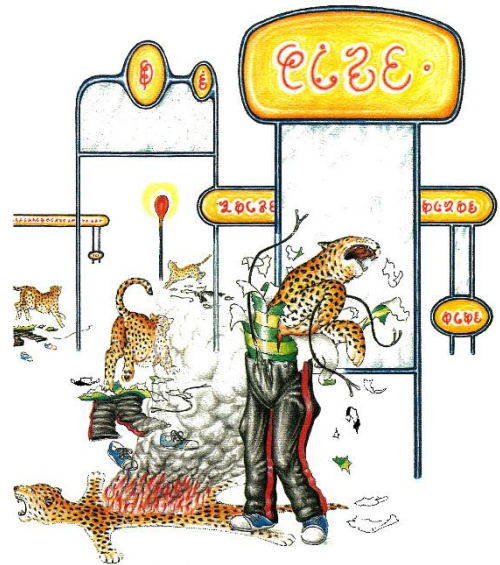
⁵⁷ Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985), ix. The paradigmatic case in this book is the series of actions and symbolic conjunctures that led to the killing of Captain James Cook in Hawai'i.



Structures of conjunctures

In light of this, doesn't it make sense to act now and make space for the meaning of it after? The risks are *in* action, in Sahlins' "structure of the conjuncture". The play's the thing where two-faced doubts collapse and writhe. The thing is, I don't mind doubts. I'm happy leaving action untaken, and I'm happy having taken it – only seldom in the taking.

I do understand, though, that action will never be done. It's not like action on a film set, captured for prosperity, unless in the Akashic Records. The outcomes are only antecedents for more action. Meanings risked and transformed only have to be risked again the next day.



Luigi Serafini, *Codex Seraphinianus* (1981)

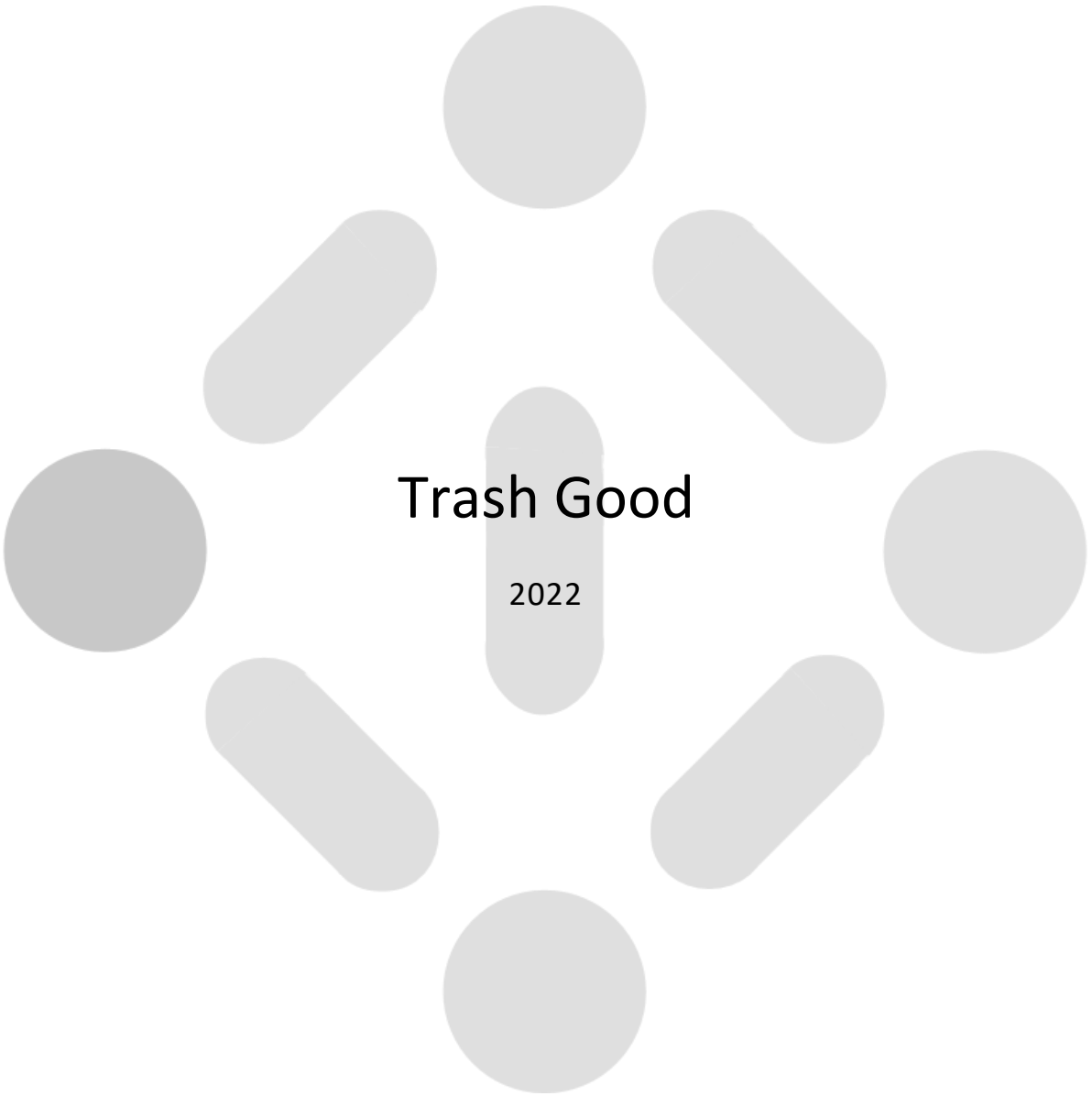
Even when we went to the tea house and churned out our papers, it was only to clear our schedules so we could take on new projects, perhaps ones over which we had a bit more control and risked less: climbing all the towers of Hangzhou in a single day; hunting for rare pirate DVDs; finding whatever it was we thought we came to China for.

I still procrastinate in many parts of my life, though I am still well aware that my to-do list will only get longer as a result. Maybe that is the awareness that makes *procrastination* a reasonable response, especially under conditions of extracted labor. There are certainly good times and places for procrastination, and I'll never claim to be unfamiliar with it. But I cherish the ideal of either moving full steam ahead or not at all – trying to avoid, most of all, anything that feels like it's only half action.

In this ideal (never achieved, to be clear), I would like to place everything I do in a simple diagram. In a rough sketch this could be four squares. In one square would sit work in the sense that my employer uses the word: careful action connected to small and fairly inconsequential circuits of capitalism. Careful, to me, because I try to instrumentalize my tools and privileges, to procrastinate where necessary, sabotage where necessary, learn and nudge, do no harm. In another square would be actions of production and maintenance that I take outside of capitalism. Here I might be less careful and more prone to act first, throw meaning into the flames, and see what comes out. The third square is for fun (thoroughly unproductive action) and the fourth for rest (productive inaction).

That kind of neat scheme is a pleasant thought, although it doesn't explain anything about why I am always acting just to get it over with. The exercise sidesteps meaning. If it does represent how I'm living, then it suggests that action's only real reason is to resolve the tension of risk and replace it with something else. Maybe just to figure out what that something is. New meaning that has partaken of the world? A chance to share the story onwards? Words of validation, perhaps. Peace.





Trash Good

2022

Trash Good



Anti-war marchers in Green Park, London, 2003

I recall a scene from the year 2003, in London, the time of the mass protests against the invasion of Iraq. A handful of American students sat on a 24-hour hunger strike beneath the eagle volant of the US embassy in Grosvenor Square. In a lull between larger marches, it was a truly minor event. I joined in because I was shocked and upset about a doomed and damning war, and because my fellow freshmen asked nicely.

Only a few people might remember that I was present, and there is one secret that only I remember. Toward the end of the 24 hours, mid-morning, I was feeling pretty unwell and hypoglycemic. So I excused myself on a toilet break, got out of sight, dodged into a shop near the underground station, and ate a discount-stickered sausage roll.

I still look back on that day and night as something embarrassing in the whole, and that has everything to do with my personal embarrassment at having broken the rules we set for ourselves. I don't believe anybody else saw me do it, but it looked bad to me.

It is not that this secret has weighed on me; I've only dredged up the story as an example of what was essentially an aesthetic appraisal of my conduct in protesting. I don't think our little camp or the ideals, intentions or shared outrage behind it were bad. All that is just overshadowed by the private shame of a hunger-striker rookie move, which made the whole undertaking a farce to me. It's one of many small experiences that year, and throughout my time in my awkwardly idealistic college surroundings, that left me feeling distant around many good things, good people and good causes.

Since then I have a record of lingering in aesthetic appraisals – especially ones rooted in awkwardness – in order to shy away from the light of the political. The present recognition, though, is a recognition that these aesthetics are political; they are closed or open doors into the good. Because I *could* remember that night in Grosvenor Square differently. Centering that image of my teenage self cowering by the doors of a Tesco Express, dry sausage roll sticking in my throat, is my choice. Only I was witness to the bad optics (as they now say), and I could just as well remember the whole protest triumphantly, even proudly. If our action in front of the embassy accomplished nothing of note, it at least wasn't because I cheated.



Aesthetic struggle

That kind of appraisal has a culture's worth of precedents behind it. Sneaking away from a hunger strike for a snack is an act with a certain mythic resonance – not capital-Myth, though, just minor urban myth. I skulked alongside the panhandler someone might have spotted going home in a new car, or the preacher with his dirty habits. Pretenders to purity. Folk fakes.



Work by João Queiroz on aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Tupinipunk

Myths of all sizes, with their sway over appraisal and memory, are heavy arms in aesthetic struggle. Well deployed they can neutralize much larger threats, stopping rebels in their tracks with sudden doubts and self-doubts. Most often, I think, they are arrayed against the ever-present danger of pride. Because the irrepressibility of pride is a serious problem, maybe *the* serious problem, for any reading of the world that would be hegemonic. Such readings describe hierarchies in which some people should know and accept that they aren't as good as others. But it's difficult to convince an entire group of people not to be proud of who they are, ever. You can certainly hurt people; you can crush spirits and make them see themselves as trash; it may work for a long time; but people, everywhere, are amazing at finding sources of pride anyway.⁵⁸

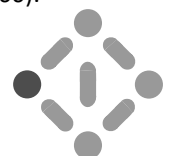
I'm not sure that there is any quality that is so one-sided as to deny this. As far as I can tell, if someone can be proud of some quality in themselves and their fellows, then someone else can find a way to take pride in the opposite. This takes many forms, and it may require an Ambedkar to articulate it, but often it seems to hinge on one basic inversion. Those who have are proud of having; those who lack are proud of thriving despite. The pure are proud of their purity; the polluted are proud of what they can absorb unharmed.⁵⁹ The perfect are proud; the trashy are proud. In each of these cases the latter group can, after all, easily make claims to being the stronger.

This brings us to trash. The cosmic dust, the nebula, the star-factory of meaning. That one's trash is another's treasure is not just a cliché, it is the endless frustration of all forms of domination over humankind. Unilaterally defining treasure as treasure and trash as trash is the ultimate power and nobody gets to have it. It is therefore essential to have not a definition but a theory of trash, which is something I will get into later.

Without the ultimate definitive power, would-be hegemony relies on something else very human: that there is reassurance in watching people fail to be better than we are. The pride of those who (the hegemon says) should not be proud is kept in check by condemnations of aesthetic failures to embody that pride. This maintains distance and keeps collectives from pulling together.

⁵⁸ Pride is all the more useful here because it is a value-neutral word, or rather, in Indo-European languages the positive and negative (even sinful) meanings have usually codeveloped in the same word while keeping their polarity. In contemporary American terms, you can think of this as the gap between gay pride and white pride.

⁵⁹ Something Mary Douglas didn't much get into in the classic text on pollution, *Purity and Danger* (1966).



Minimum viable utopia

In our particular era, perfectionism is a significant locus of control that serves to short-circuit appraisals of aesthetic and political alternatives. It is the counterrevolution the baby boomers left us with, hardened under gen-x's withering looks. Our inheritance is an impossible set of rules for utopia. One can't simply throw an idea out there about how the world could be better (even if that is the way social change has always happened). Utopia has to be a fully working model, proposal and action plan, with all details accounted for, from the quarterly budget to the sanitation system, like a late-stage game of SimCity. Anything less is very suspicious and its gaps will immediately be pointed out.



Mike Kazaleh, *Sidewalk*, 2018

Complicit in this is a naturalizing myth about utopians: the life cycle model of politics. This is the model that maps the left–right political axis to the expected arc of a person's life. It is conventional wisdom, and just sounds good, that people should be radical and idealistic when they are young and age into realist conservatism. This has been said in many ways by many self-satisfied elders. A typical example from German politics is in the 2020 film *Und Morgen die Ganze Welt*, when the main character's father comments about her moving into a collective, "those under 30 and not on the left have no heart, those over 30 and still on the left have no brain" – thereby mobilizing both age and gender tropes in a hierarchy of allowable softness subservient to necessary hardness.

I find this life cycle model stifling, insulting to both young and old people, and poorly supported by evidence, among my generation especially. It's time to discard it, along with the rules of utopia, because both of these have the same end message: that things cannot really be other than they are. And that is poorly supported by evidence too. The better question to ask is, where to if we don't demand perfection? What if we only ask for good – and only define good as better than bad?

Then the doors fall open and all is utopia. Every pretty dream, every fandom, every act of the imagination is a utopian project. A group of people who just want to get together and watch anime, or play metal, or build boats, or a million other easy examples, are engaging in trashy but nonetheless fully realized visions of social organization. Their manifesto is all there as subtext or often just text. Wherever a group of people are imagining new relations and new forms of value, wishing their whole world could be made up of gentle pixels or vegetable gardens or ragas or warehouse raves or forest elves or, I don't know, even crypto, they are imagining that world into being and thereby engaging in resistance against the world that is.⁶⁰ I can point out that none of these trashy visions could really constitute a total alternative to the world that is, but what do I gain and what do I miss when I choose to do that?

⁶⁰ People see this clearly when presented with equivalent efforts by rebels in societies they deem oppressive, such as fans of basically anything in the USSR or PRC, whose interests are always obviously subversive and brave to Western observers. When the larger society carries legitimacy, weird hobbies are just weird hobbies.



Two trash irresolvables

I called the above trashy visions because they inevitably fall short against the requirements of minimum viable utopia as we are accustomed to setting them. This falling-short is the basis of my theory of trash. And it's fine. These are adequate examples for the purposes of this essay and the form of value I'm interested in turning to here, which is resistance. Creations, whether they be city-states or small fragile fan-dreams, are for present purposes just the tokens of resistance.



Communists in Hyde Park, London, 2003

While looking for the irresolvable conundrum that invests resistance with value, as I've done with other forms of value in these essays, I'd like to stay close to the trash commitments of this piece. In that spirit I won't try to argue for one strong, central irresolvable but two trash irresolvables, which maybe aren't irresolvables at all. Perhaps they at least add up to one, with a bit of rounding.

The first trash irresolvable is that resistance is – let's say always – nested within larger circles of resistance. The rebels oppose a system that is itself opposing something larger, even if that something larger is only the passage of time, and within the ranks of the rebellion there are members vying for their own interests, too. Foucault made everyone painfully aware of this – that domination and resistance go all the way up and down – but to my eyes it's not really an irresolvable, at this point, just a fact of life. It's not even always a bad fact; schismogenesis is an elemental social force. So the embeddedness of resistance is not so much a dilemma as it is a truth that requires me to define the frame around a given act of resistance, and therefore to take a stake in what's good or bad. It is the reason I'm attempting to define trash in this essay but not to define good, at least not in all-purpose terms. It is also the reason why it's not really sustainable to hold the position that all resistance is good, or to always be on the side of the rebels, though it's been tried.

The other trash irresolvable is the way that in acts of resistance and utopianism, meaning tends to exceed consequence. This doesn't satisfy me as an irresolvable either, and once again I think it's just the way of things. Sometimes we do stuff that doesn't change the world, or even budge the world an inch; sometimes we lose; sometimes we're just camped outside the embassy talking to each other. That's okay. What we did still matters. All who resist know this to be true.

I guess what I have less and less time for is the dismissal of mere aesthetic, symbolic or "performative" acts. To write these off is like talking about how some disliked thing is "just a social construct" – it furthers a basic misunderstanding that all of these words are synonyms for "not real". Of course meaning is very real, and it *can* exceed consequence. Without allowing meaning's autonomy from consequence there is only power, or the attention economy if that is the synonym we're using – competing meanings quantified into struggles whose only politics is gross majoritarianism.



Borrowing trash aesthetics

Trash good is about absorbing both of these trash irresolvables and letting them pollute me. These are among the major sources of awkwardness in the aesthetic appraisals that I make of the good, and this awkwardness haunts. It haunts me through the years, when remembering flawed moments of good, with that special grip embarrassment holds on the human memory. It haunts good



Riki-Oh: The Story of Ricky, 1991

acts that I've participated in, and it haunts ones that I've witnessed from afar or just read about. It haunts my imagination. In response, trash good is a Harawayesque bid to stay with the awkwardness.⁶¹ It is considering that maybe my discomfort is a sign of distances worth closing. It is coming closer to the fire that I cringe away from, because the fire is utopia.

I have some good starting points in this, because trash aesthetics is hardly an unexamined field. Film critics have been at it for some time, for one. Their special conundrum is to explain the workings of the so-bad-it's-good, an organizing principle of cult fandoms that are, in their own small way, also utopian.

Trash in cinema means films that set out to achieve something, fail, and are loved for it. This has been interpreted as a form of resistance against the intended readings of filmmakers, but I'm rather more convinced by an argument of James MacDowell and James Zborowski. They write that the visible intentions of a filmmaker clearly remain central to a so-bad-it's-good reading, because fans must accept the film's intentions as intentions if they are able to enjoy its failures as failures.⁶²

I think, instead of resisting filmmakers, allegiance to trash cinema is about resisting the terms and hierarchies of all appraisal. These fans uphold the small, the janky, the queer of course, and the fleeting moments of worth and meaning that will always be something qualitatively different from the immortal successes of a Great Film. They deny that making Great Films is even what cinema is for. Most of all, they uphold the kinds of movies where the watcher feels like anything can happen. Movie fans also have nuanced understandings of the often unclear boundaries of trash: Where is the border between trash and parody? Trash and irony? Trash and shitposting? Trash as unintentional sublimity and trash as unintentional comedy? The mass trash of cinematic empire and the amateur trash of its outsiders? (These last are not, if you ask me, so far away from each other; they meet every day in fandom.)

There's a lot to learn from this arena, because valuing trash is a primary form of aesthetic resistance. This (yes, finally) is what I mean by trash good: appraising good things, good people and good causes as though even their failures are constitutive of their goodness.

⁶¹ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

⁶² James MacDowell and James Zborowski, The Aesthetics of "So Bad it's Good": Value, Intention, and The Room. *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media* 6 (2013).



Trash (but) good

To put this proposal as simply as I can: If the perfect is the enemy of the good, then the perfect is my enemy too. And that is as much of a binary as I wish to deal in here; what I value most about trash good is the way “trash” and “good” are not opposites. Trash is less a synonym of bad than it is an antonym of perfect. It lies at a messy angle next to good, as though someone knocked it over while reaching for their drink. That makes trash fun to think with.



Perfumed Nightmare, 1977

So the dynamic within the phrase trash good can work many ways, as it takes no special alchemy to unify the two. Usually it just takes some kind of *but*. Make your own examples: pick something off the far left and something off the far right of this table, keep the *but* in the middle, knock it around a little, and you have a description of something that might be considered trash (but) good.

junk food	<i>trash for you</i>	but	<i>good for you</i>	nourishment
useless anywhere else	<i>trash lesson</i>		<i>good lesson</i>	shows the way
embarrassing	<i>trash example</i>		<i>good example</i>	illuminates understanding
selfish and destructive	<i>trash hearted</i>		<i>good hearted</i>	innate kindness
follows no narrative	<i>trash story</i>		<i>good story</i>	creates a narrative
hate to be there	<i>trash time</i>		<i>good time</i>	had to be there
amateur and inept	<i>trash at</i>		<i>good at</i>	master at work
misguided goal	<i>trash intent</i>		<i>good intent</i>	right goal
failure	<i>trash outcome</i>		<i>good outcome</i>	a little better world

Embarrassing, but a master at work. A failure, but you had to be there. If I were to re-appraise that hunger strike in Grosvenor Square, I might even say it was amateur and inept, but showed the way.

How can it be that the trashiness of good is constitutive of its goodness, even when the two are joined by a *but*? I don't know. Nothing's perfect.

Even if I can't explain it, my earnest hope is that the good people keep getting better at it. Without feeding the life cycle model of politics, I defer to the (culturally) younger on this, because they are the ones attending closely to aesthetics in ways that are easy for the (culturally) older and wiser to dismiss. Punk, DIY and queer have come and been and shattered into a million sparkly pieces: schismogenesis.



Right now I'm charmed by the Aesthetics Wiki,⁶³ a curatorial effort to document the aesthetics of the era in a kind of free association art-history archive that is nevertheless very aware that most of its users are there looking for themselves – most of the comment sections boil down to “this is me!” or “is this me?”. Some years after we're supposed to have stopped taking anything with a -core, -punk or -wave suffix seriously, the wiki is awkward, image-conscious and beholden to the subjectivity of Instagram (truly the Hot Topic of the 2020s), but stick with it and it runs deep.⁶⁴



Community-submitted image on aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Goblincore.

Looking not for myself but rather for trash good, there are aesthetics that loosely align: Crowcore, Goblincore, Green Academia, Groundcore, Salvagepunk, Soft Apocalypse, Solarpunk, Trailer Park Princess, Trashcore, and so on. These variously aestheticize the small and overlooked, the devalued, the environmentally redemptive and the tenderqueer good. Sure, anything on here is vulnerable to being subsumed by capital, but so are we all. I can't help but think the curators are doing important work that I would miss if I just called it branding.

Salvagepunk, in particular, digs into the aesthetics of doing our best with the trash around us. It even has some academic input⁶⁵ behind it in the film-centric work of Evan Calder Williams, who built out a vision of salvagepunk in the big scrapheap between the 2008 financial crash and Occupy Wall Street. Williams was writing about salvage of objects, but not just objects:

What needs to be salvaged are social relations, broken forms of lived communist thought, discarded by our moment as the outmoded waste of a century. These are lost utopian moments, to be sure, but they are also the massive weight of sometimes catastrophic attempts to live differently. Not just the spectral traces of theories and dreams, but the social and historical ruins of concrete attempts to move beyond capitalism. When we talk of occupying trash sites and of building tools from the junkyard, this is what we mean. Not that we should valorize either the waste dweller forced to live in abjection or the cluttered objects themselves, but rather that our relation to our radical history must take the form of salvage. The thought of salvage is the thought of all that is thrown out by the totality of late capitalism, the traditions and horizons of collectivity, solidarity, and true antagonism.⁶⁶

These are nice sentiments, and I'm on board, but they also make me think about the special venom of the aesthetic condemnations (from without and within) made against those engaged in this kind of salvage, which arguably might be everyone on the Aesthetics Wiki: appropriators, hipsters, posers, nostalgists. Everybody's least favorite utopians.

⁶³ aesthetics.fandom.com.

⁶⁴ You might be thinking of Tumblr, but that has faded far enough from view that it is now its own nostalgia aesthetic: aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/2014-era_tumblr.

⁶⁵ Although maybe less Green Academic than, let's say, Bibliopunk.

⁶⁶ Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010).



Small distances

The phenomenon of distance operates at a pretty simple cognitive level. It is the way I can tune out a kind of music for years until the first time I find myself singing or dancing along,⁶⁷ or the way I'm not really in a march until I join the shouting. Through a sudden pathway that probably involves mirror neurons or something, I close the distance and gain a stake in where it (the song or the march) is going and where it



Americans in London, 2003

doesn't go but could. Or maybe it's not so much that participation closes distance as that abstention (no less intentional an action) maintains distance – distance that I may, otherwise, stray across through small and unnoticed meandering. Therefore, if I go to the edge of some aesthetic and/or utopian project and ask “is this me?”, that is an important question after all.

The significance of this cognitive stake is concealed whenever the closing of distance is demoted to just *attention*. Attention is an economy, as we've all been taught in recent times. But market economies are usually shadowed, sometimes overshadowed, by parallel gift economies. I think *praise* is that gift economy. It is the real thread that pulls things together, and operating with the Maussian logic of the gift, praise is stranger and more generative than attention. For instance, giving praise and accepting it are both equally important, because as a gift it contains something of the giver. It doesn't belong to me as giver or you as recipient; it's what hangs suspended between us.

If I'm using the word praise vaguely, I really do just mean telling someone that they are doing something good – being a fan. In the terms of the attention economy this is a bit of extra labor and ought to be a calculated move, as it costs me and profits you, unless I can leverage it to get attention back from you or others. As a gift however praise is only additive. Praise in the plural is pride.

Praise is also appraisal (or at least has exerted an etymological pull on it) and this brings me back to aesthetic appraisal as a way of world-making and a form of resistance. What we see and like and praise and draw close to ourselves is absolutely consequential for the political.

Is it messed up, then, to just be a *fan* of good efforts at resistance? People who work really hard and risk a lot to make a difference in the world are understandably unimpressed by people who sit at home and agree with what they're doing. When it comes to really doing good, just having the right opinions is the most useless kind of morality, and praise is not much better. But for me this is about keeping perspective. There's perspective on what I can really accomplish or contribute myself, which may be more in the realm of consequence: I have resources and privileges and other things that can be useful. Then there's perspective on what I don't need to contribute, which may be more in the realm of meaning, where I'm seldom going to be the one to make good out of nothing, and often I have only awkward words of praise to bring.

⁶⁷ Try it: find a station you don't like on your radio or radio.garden and make yourself hum along for an hour.



I'm done feeling awkward for anyone

My own political life cycle hasn't taken me very far, really:

An upbringing on the academic-socialist fringe of Kansas.

Some years getting a close look at global apartheid on other parts of the planet.

My embarrassment around pretensions to goodness in college.



Folkets Hus, Copenhagen, 2022

And then a greater openness, along with many of my cohort, in the collapsing 2010s.

(Plus I moved to Denmark, so that shifted the political baseline a bit too.)

I don't think I ever grew more or less radical, just more comfortable with dropping a disguise of being a normal, not-too-political person. As the catastrophe of the neoliberal order became more and more obvious to everyone, there was eventually nothing to hide. We can all see that making new worlds is the only sensible survival strategy.

Now I've come to feel warmly again towards the aesthetics of the counterculture leftovers I grew up with, their xeroxed illuminated manuscripts and sing-alongs and my "bread and roses" t-shirt. I want that much hope around me, new and vital but no more perfect than the old stuff was. I would like trash good to be my thing for a while. I would like to get out from behind my distancing appraisals and admit that I have seen enough of the world now to know good well enough when I see it, and not to pretend that *I'm* the one who is too good for *it*.

Besides, if my studied anthropological detachment is useful for anything it has to be useful for shoving off that awkwardness and participating in whatever I find worth participating in. Participant observation is just a way of trying to close distances. However, there are also times when participation can be selfish and observing can be selfless. It takes a lot of sensibility to know when I contribute my presence to something good and when I have nothing to contribute. I hope to have that sensibility.

My role could be lots of things: to watch, to praise, to support materially, or none of that. To go where the audience is small or spread out where the march is thin. To be there, not necessarily matching the aesthetic but not opposing it unless I intend to oppose it. To stay open to new utopian projects, giving them a fair appraisal, and always – always – allowing people who believe that they are doing it for the first time to keep believing that. Who cares if it has been tried before or not? Utopia is just an easy little thing to get together and make.

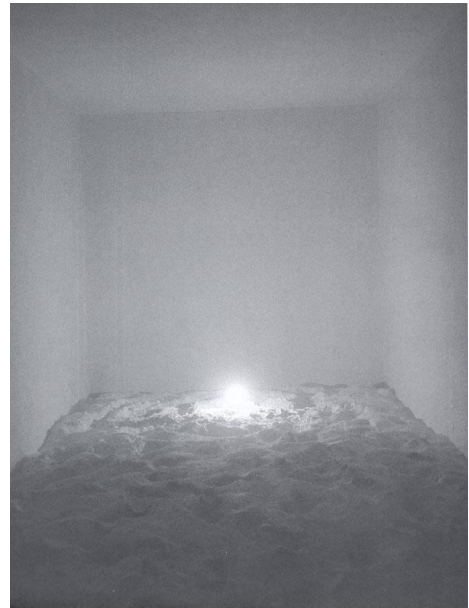




What Hangs Suspended

2022

What Hangs Suspended



Cildo Meireles, *Volátil* (1980–1994).
Talc, candle, mercaptan.

One time, in need of something to do, I founded a secret society. I wanted to experiment with just how secret a society could be, since that is where their power comes from, and I decided that it would be most secret if only one member knew about it. I wrote up a founding document of complicated rites, rules, some pretty cool symbolism, a hidden agenda and a roll of initiates. Then I conducted a series of initiation rites, and never told any of the initiates that they were in it.

The hidden agenda continues to this day. I'm not sure if it ever was the most secret society possible, though, considering that I know all about it; you might argue that a more secret society would be one that *no* members know exists. Or one that doesn't know it is a society yet.

If this sounds like a joke that I took pretty far, it isn't really; this is the condition we move around in. We navigate by one another without ever really knowing what we are a part of. Are we friends, acquaintances or sworn co-conspirators? That is up to you as well as me.

That is to say, in an atomized age, all sociality is secret. Even the minor arts of friendship are mystified to a point where we shouldn't, don't and can't really talk about them much. I have to act natural; if I give too much away about how I portion my time and priorities, how I respond when I hear from you, the ways I mix praise and jokes, what I trust and what I fear about you, then you know too much and it all starts to come apart.

If friendship is so hard then it's hard to say what collective possibilities there really are. In all honesty I don't see many for myself. I was raised as an individual in a culture of individuals, and the classical collective ways of life will probably never be mine even if I want them.

So honestly, what is the best we atoms can do?



Kind of a conclusion

When I started writing the essays of which this is the last, I tried to keep each one tidy by not allowing myself to pull threads between them. Aside from a single point of foreshadowing leading from each recognition to the next, I didn't allow them to rest on each other; they were to be free-floating crafts of their own.

For a while, I did consider whether I was going to feel the need to follow up with an afterword.

I don't think I will. I've just decided instead that, in the way the first recognition doubled as an entry point into the whole project, this one makes a fitting enough exit point. Because if all of these recognitions have been about myself – my habits, my maps and models, my haunting feelings, my aspirations – all of them have also been attempts to get outside of myself. With this one, I want to try one more time and claim that the myself I have been writing about was never really my subject or my destination.

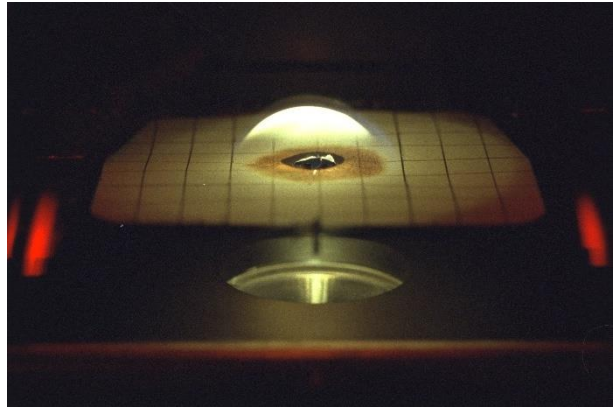
Instead, where I have been headed all along is a place somewhere in between myself and others. For a long time (since some time before my secret society at least) I have given it the image of a small flickering flame, a candle-flame with no candle, that hangs suspended in the air between us. If we are in the same room, it is perhaps right there over the coffee table. If we are far apart it may float above the ocean at night. Because I share my life with many people, there are other flames all around me, except not really, because each flame only exists for me *and* somebody else.

This is my own perhaps indulgently poetic imagining of the location of creation. A tour through recognitions of forms of value that began with the value of understanding ends here with this value, creation, which I might also have called co-creation, but I truly think co-creation is the only kind there is. All we create is created in the in-between and colored by flame.

If we're not making something together, I am making something for you, or I am building on ideas and language that have meaning because we share them in common. Or I'm making something because you made me want to. This essay is a creation like that; its value is in my creating it, and every word I'm putting into it is not my own, but a word that hangs suspended between me and others.

I create for, create from and create with others: this is the truth, more so than anything I might have written in other essays about my interior motors. All forms of value I've written my way through – understanding, peace, experience, meaning, possibility, success, action, resistance – hang somewhere between us. If I'm ever going to find answers they will be somewhere out there.

And what makes *creation* so valuable, in this light, is the recognition that you and I can somehow co-create or even relate at all across the infinite distance that separates us.



NASA/Glenn Research Center, JAMIC test results for flame spread and radiative ignition 10 second drop tests (1995).



We are stronger than the formal signification of conjunction

During the pandemic, one of my most important isolation books was Lithuanian-born philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. I don't recall how I came to it, but I knew when I put in the library request that this was one for me, and I sank pretty deep into it. Here was a philosopher who was first a writer, practicing phenomenology and poetics at the same time to find the reach of language, and I could quote him for pages ("Exteriority is not a negation, but a marvel").⁶⁸

Levinas is remembered for being about one thing: the "ultimate situation" of coming face to face with the other. His ethics and phenomenology start here, already holding an answer to totality (specifically, the totality that took Levinas through the concentration camps), and an answer we all give all the time. We recognize the infinite distance between us as separate minds, preventing our collation into a totality; but we also recognize that we can relate across that infinity, preventing our atomization.

The pathos of liberalism, which we rejoin on one side, lies in the promotion of a person inasmuch as he represents nothing further, that is, is precisely a self. Then multiplicity can be produced only if the individuals retain their secrecy, if the relation that unites them into a multiplicity is not visible from the outside, but proceeds from one unto the other. If it were entirely visible from the outside, if the exterior point of view would open upon its ultimate reality, the multiplicity would form a totality in which the individuals would participate; the bond between persons would not have preserved the multiplicity from addition. In order that multiplicity be maintained, the relation proceeding from me to the Other – the attitude of one person with regard to another – must be stronger than the formal signification of conjunction, to which every relation risks being degraded. This greater force is concretely affirmed in the fact that the relation proceeding from me to the other cannot be included within a network of relations visible to a third party.⁶⁹

The bending of space that accommodates infinity into our relations, and even while face to face keeps you always at a position high out of my grasp, thwarts attempts to rationalize the network in Euclidean space. "This impossibility of conciliation among beings, this radical heterogeneity, in fact indicates a mode of being produced and an ontology that is not equivalent to panoramic existence and its disclosure," Levinas wrote.⁷⁰ We can only explain the world to each other, face to face.

⁶⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 292. It was first published in French in 1961, so his translator Alphonso Lingis gets my respect too.

⁶⁹ *Totality and Infinity*, 120–21.

⁷⁰ *Totality and Infinity*, 294.



Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon: Moon in the Flame* (1886).



This is not a social network

Here is where my recognition of what hangs suspended is a very intentional refusal of the actor-networks-into-Big-Data theoretical train. It's not an information circuit that connects you and I, plugging us into a larger and eminently observable network; it's a flame.

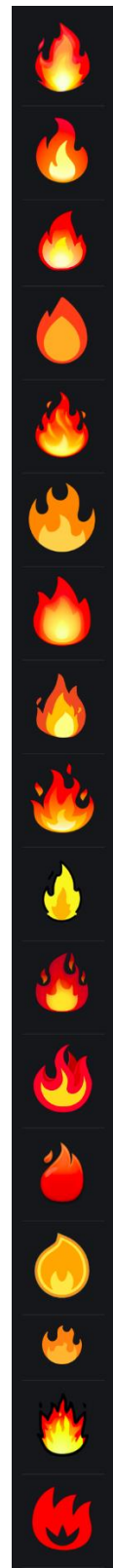
Infinity for Levinas was a way to describe any distance we can never cross, like the distance between minds. He set aside vision as a basis for philosophy because vision brings us things from out in the world and tells us we can have them. But we can't have each other's minds; we can only relate: "a being separated from the Infinite nonetheless relates to it, with a relation that does not nullify the infinite interval of the separation".⁷¹ This, if I may borrow it directly, is the irreconcilable "nonetheless" that gives value to our acts of creation.

The key is language – any kind, like simply conversation, but also symbolic language – which crosses the infinite and allows us to live from one another. The idea of "living from" is another crucial Levinasian one, rich and nuanced. It hinges on the possibility of nourishing ourselves with the things that we do not and cannot consume. Living from means drawing sustenance from needs we can't fulfil. It means enjoying without having.

If it's a flame that hangs suspended (or so I imagine it), the flame does not consume. To feed it is not to abandon anything to the fire, exactly. And we do not consume the flame, either, but live from it.

If it's a flame that hangs suspended, it represents an intersubjective subjectivity – call it an interperson. It's where we keep thought and emotion that is not wholly mine or wholly yours. It's the things we have told each other, the things we agreed to believe, the streets we walk down. It is the intersection of our two fields of perception when we are face to face: how I see you and how you see me. These things are not simply contributing parts of larger social assemblages, no more than I as an individual am simply that. They have their own flickering life.

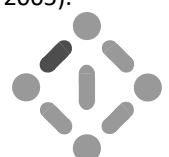
If it's a flame that hangs suspended, we lit it, but not with intention: it was lit by friction. I mean friction of the metaphorical category elaborated by anthropologist Anna Tsing in her work on globalization and its "zones of awkward engagement" that produce not clashes but heat and light.⁷² While Tsing was writing about cultural politics and forest fires I also like her metaphor a lot on the interpersonal scale of this essay. I have my recognitions, and you have your recognitions, and because of their imperfect interfaces, when we converse we light a flame.



Fire emoji, 17
platforms,
emojipedia.org

⁷¹ *Totality and Infinity*, 80.

⁷² Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005).



What heaven perhaps will grant us

It doesn't have to be dramatic. The recognition of what hangs suspended is perhaps clearest in quiet moments:

When watching a friend play a computer game, sitting in silence, losing track of time and not wanting to go home.⁷³

Or when talking about trivialities on an internet forum, as we all used to do, trading empty stories about getting a castle to live in together with our made-up family.⁷⁴

Or when cooking to a recipe you taught me once, years ago.

Or the happy friction that makes up most of my married life with one especially good other.



Ben Beese, *Room quarantine conversation* (2021).
Middlebury College Archives.

If my Levinasian philosophy of relating without touching all sounds suspiciously asexual coming from me, then sure. There is probably a reason that it appeals more than ideas of interpersonal relations that place more importance on deep physical ways of knowing and less metaphorical kinds of friction. In the same vein, the things we create between us are not, I insist, babies.⁷⁵

Among other allies I count Borges, one of those historical figures whose name sits unverifiably on the lists of possible asexuals. In a very asexy poem he called this kind of relation

What heaven perhaps will grant us:
not to be wondered at or required to succeed
but simply to be let in
as part of an undeniable reality,
like stones of the road, like trees.⁷⁶

Being real is probably the core of this, whether the thing that wants to be let in is me as a whole person, or a character like the squirrelthief, or just some small thing I have created. Being let into a reality, a shared flame, is recognizing and being recognized in the same movement. This is a stripped-bare Eros that makes sense to me.

⁷³ I'm fascinated by streamed games, never expecting that one of my favorite ways of inhabiting another's subjectivity as a kid, watching SimAnt over someone's shoulder, would turn into mass entertainment.

⁷⁴ I write about fora, not social networking platforms, because in my limited experience the latter's totalizing network-gaze makes a dissipating and hostile environment for all forms of life that hang suspended.

⁷⁵ This is also where I parted ways with Levinas, when late in his book he started making everything about father-son relationships and weirdly gendering it all in a way that left unclear whether he thought women even had subjectivity at all.

⁷⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, *Plainness* (1968).



Philosophy and thrift

I think, all the time, that if this is all I really want then my choices should be simple. Make friends, let them in, create stuff together, explain each other, live from each other.

It's not that simple though, because mostly I don't act like I believe the things I have professed here. I insist on the value of the interpersonal and devotion to friends... but am terrible about staying in touch. I keep souvenirs of my relations around me as reminders of what hangs suspended, and I do things constantly because they make me think of other people... but I forget to tell them what I've done. I hold long conversations in my head with people... who I haven't actually seen in ages. I watch the achievements and creations of others with awe... but never praise them where they can hear it. I studiously get to know people... better, as it turns out, than they know me. Worst of all I keep my guard up and am not easy to get to know, even as I am aware that letting people know me is fundamental to becoming me.



James Tissot, *The Evil Counsel* (1886–1894).

I am not content to treat the deep and the surface business of life as different things, which is to say, to regards personality traits and unhelpful behaviors like these as just patterns in need of “working on myself”. I won't treat myself as a mundane subjectivity with mundane ethical concerns and a mundane deficit of social skills. I refuse.

This one subjectivity is all I have – I'll be as grand about it as I like! If you have been reading all of these recognitions, you'll know that by now. And no, I'm not just trying to philosophize my way around being shy. I really do think that these things are problems rooted deep in our symbolic orders and the ethics of how we regard each other.

For example, I might think of myself as an introvert in a mechanical-engineering kind of sense, and socializing as work that drains my introvert battery – a common line of explanation among my Jung-affected peers that I've absorbed over the years. This then has plain consequences for how I'll act, which is primarily in a transactional or economical mode. And I can see exactly that mode in my reticence to engage: I act like I believe I'm spending energy, or money, or something that works like money. I get conservative.

Language is a medium and also the token of creation – how we represent its value to each other so it may circulate. But language is also expensive. Observation becomes my neutral state because it's “free”, even if I acknowledge that greater forms of value hang suspended. Then I try to live from others quietly and unobtrusively, undemandingly, which is not unlike inducting them into a secret society without telling them.



The end is not desiring to be more connected with others but to recognize that I am

If it takes me time to form meaningful, creative relations, at least I know that I am willing to go through a lot of awkwardness to get there. This has been my one advantage and will have to continue to be, because I'll never stop feeling awkward when I stand face to face with a new other. It's just not in my nature to let myself treat new encounters as repetitions of old ones.

And eventually something changes. A transformation I'll forever be slow to notice: our fleeting interactions in the jostle of our lives, heretofore only providing aesthetic impressions of one another (which, to be fair, I still enjoy) become more fluid and a sort of entrainment takes hold. Funnily enough, that entrainment makes me feel so much more like myself.



USDA Forest Service, *Flame thrower in operation. Bark beetle control. Wasatch National Forest, Utah (1961).*

Here is a thought: The time it takes me to feel myself around you is the time it takes to light the flame. The kindling of that which hangs suspended is a process, and a process has a duration.

In that duration, the least useful thought for me to snag on is the idea that I am imposing myself – that will never be my nature. Any work I might put into that worry I could put into just being an interesting other. I enjoy people who share of themselves, and probably people like that enjoy people like that too. I'm not imposing on anybody who finds me interesting. It's not a burden to know me.

Here is a bigger thought: I waste a lot of time, and always have, desiring to be more connected with others. How much more fruitful is it to simply recognize that I am connected, more connected than I can even see or control? I need people who know who I am, which is a good need. And I have people who know who I am, because a need is not a lack.

We need to explain to each other who we are. We can explain through honest words, through jokes, through play, through rebellion, through the friction between our different recognitions. We can only do it together, face to face; cultures only know about cultures, societies only know about societies, and we only know us.

We *are* a secret society. Tied by language – speech – breath. Blowing on flames. So much etymology comes back to breath, but this may be the best one because it's so obvious when you see it: to breathe together is to conspire. And this may be the ultimate conspiracy theory: that we are all in conspiracy, and conspiracy is all there is.

